

HITLER AND STALIN: MILITARY COMMAND RELATIONSHIPS
AND THE COURSE OF WORLD WAR TWO
ON THE EASTERN FRONT

by

Cody K. Carlson

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Ronald Smelser
Ronald Smelser
Chair: Supervisory Committee

Approved for the Major Department

[Signature]
Chair/Dean

Approved for the Graduate Council

[Signature]
David S. Chapm
Dean of The Graduate

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the highest command relationships that existed in the Soviet Union's Red Army and in the German Army just prior to and during the Second World War. The roles of Hitler and Stalin as supreme military commander are considered in relationship with their higher generals and how these relationships bore significantly on the course of the war. Hitler's increasing micromanagement of the German war effort, and Stalin's belated willingness to delegate military authority make up the central themes of this work.

A variety of secondary sources, as well as generals' memoirs and diaries, point to the conclusion that Hitler and Stalin were both military amateurs who possessed grand strategic visions, but lacked the competent operational understanding of the trained military technician. After the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler inserted himself further and further down into the chain of command and directed tactical movements from hundreds of miles away. By contrast, Stalin began the war dominating the Red Army but gradually came to respect the abilities of his military specialists. Hitler's disdain for his generals and Stalin's respect for his proved a major factor in the Soviet victory in the Second World War.

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

The relationships between Adolf Hitler and Josef Stalin and their respective army leaderships played an important role throughout the course of the Second World War in Europe. How the dictators exercised command and worked with their senior generals, General Staffs, and higher field commanders had major consequences on the battlefield. These relationships, colored as they were by the dictators' personality traits, military preferences, and political considerations directly influenced the outcome of the war.

How did the dictators deal with their army leaderships both before and during the war? In what ways did these relationships shape military policy and operations? To what extent did the dictators, steeped in political dogma, use political institutions and controls to dominate their militaries?

Even a cursory review of events suggests that Hitler increasingly micromanaged the German Army as the war progressed. Stalin's control over the Red Army shifted back and forth between tight political control, and greater responsibility and authority for military officers. Understanding the way in which the dictators meddled in operations or allowed greater freedom for their officers is of paramount importance when considering the course of the Second World War in Europe. This interpretation is very much a 'Great

Man' approach to history, as it is difficult to imagine World War II playing out in a similar fashion without the dominating personalities of Hitler and Stalin.

Emphasis in this study is on the relationships between the dictators and their army leaderships, as opposed to the leaderships of other services. Both Germany and the Soviet Union were primarily land powers where the German Army and the Red Army enjoyed a leading status among the various military branches. The Nazi-Soviet war was a battle of massive land armies engaged in a life or death struggle for the regimes they served. The fight between these two European powers was the central theatre of the Second World War. Battles and events which played out on this front profoundly affected the dictators' views and actions with regard to their military leaderships. For this reason the Russian front is given priority in this study over military events in Western Europe.

Following this introduction, the second chapter considers the armies of Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union as political institutions and their roles in German and Soviet societies are reviewed. The years leading up to the conflict are evaluated, as Hitler prepared his military to launch a war of aggression and Stalin asserted political domination over the Red Army through ruthless purges.

Chapter 3 looks at the years of Hitler's military success as Poland, France, and the Low Countries fell to the Wehrmacht. This is contrasted with the Soviet setback in Finland and the renewed attempt make the Red Army a formidable military force.

The fourth chapter begins by examining the theory that Stalin was preparing to launch an invasion against Germany in late 1941 or early 1942, and therefore Hitler's invasion of the Soviet Union was a preemptive war. The preparations for 'Operation

Barbarossa' the German invasion of the Soviet Union as considered, as are Soviet actions at the time. Detailed attention is paid to Stalin's concentration of military power in the weeks following the invasion, as is Hitler's leadership in the drive toward Moscow.

The dictators' roles in key battles are considered in Chapter 5. Stalin's foolhardy offensives in early 1942 are looked at, as are the significant Soviet victories at Stalingrad and Kursk. Chapter 6 examines the Soviet offensive 'Operation Bagration', as well as the military consequences in Germany following the failed attempt to murder Hitler in 1944. The battle for Berlin in 1945 is also considered.

The examples offered will demonstrate that the relationships between the dictators and their army leaderships were never fixed and immutable, but were in a constant state of flux. These relationships were processes in which the supreme military power of the state sought to achieve victory in conjunction with military technicians using both new and established military and political institutions. The way in which these processes evolved had the most serious consequences and shaped in no small degree the outcome of the Second World War.

CHAPTER 2

THE ARMIES AND POLITICS ON THE EVE OF THE SECOND WORLD WAR

The Armies as Political Institutions

Though they both functioned as the primary defense institutions of the state, the Red Army and the German Army were decidedly different in their political character and in their relationship to the regimes they served. One was a new creation, a child of the Russian Revolution. The other had existed in one form or another for centuries and had been a dominating influence on Prussian and German politics.

In early 1918 the Soviet state required a fighting force to protect it from the lingering threat of German aggression and the emerging danger of White, anti-Bolshevik military units. The Tsar's army had virtually disappeared by this point as a cohesive and disciplined military structure. Lenin's new Commissar for War, Leon Trotsky, succeeded in creating a wholly Bolshevik military force to suit the needs of the revolutionary regime. Many younger officers who had served the Tsar were allowed to join the Red Army, but were kept on a tight reign by political commissars, party members who shared military responsibility with the officers but who reported directly to political leaders. Together with the creation of the regime's secret police force, the Cheka, the Red Army

brought stability to the new state and ensured the success of the revolution during the Russian Civil War.¹

The Bolshevik Revolution delivered the death blow to the Russian provisional government, society, and their remaining Tsarist institutions. It also swept aside what was left of the Imperial Army and Russian officer corps. In their place a communist military institution had been created which was interconnected with the regime through an iron net of political oversight to ensure its loyalty. The Bolsheviks considered the Red Army as a necessary tool within the larger framework of organizations whose ultimate goal was to build a true communist state. It was not viewed as an independent and professional institution as militaries in other European nations were generally regarded.² The Red Army generals with whom Stalin fought the “Great Patriotic War” generally emerged from humble origins and most saw front line experience fighting against the Central Powers or in the Civil War. For instance Semon Timoshenko had been an Odessa farmer and Georgy Zhukov had been a cobbler from Moscow until they were drafted into the Tsar’s Army.³ Though many senior officers came from the lower classes some, like Boris Shaposhnikov, had been career military men in the Tsar’s army who made the transition from imperialist to communist.⁴

In its attempt to mirror the classless society of the Soviet state, the Red Army allowed ordinary peasants and workers not only to serve, but to climb as high as their

¹ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1982), 75-6.

² Richard Overy, *Russia’s War, A History of the Soviet War Effort: 1941-1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 1998), 3.

³ Catherine Merridale, *Ivan’s War, Life and Death in the Red Army, 1939-1945* (New York: Picador, 2006) 35-6.

⁴ Robert Conquest, *Stalin, Breaker of Nations* (New York: Penguin Books, 1991), 240.

ambition and ability allowed. This would have been unthinkable in the rigid, class-conscious officer corps of the Tsarist Army. The Russian Revolution had created a new role for the national military. The Red Army was not designed to be the personal military of an exalted Emperor; rather it was to serve as part of a great social experiment. In the years leading up to the Second World War the Red Army would constantly reexamine this role against the practical needs of state defense. Within Stalin's USSR this balancing act of political vs. practical roles for the Red Army led to a devastating purge of the Red Army officers in the late 1930s and disaster in 1941 as an unprepared Soviet military faced Nazi invasion.

The German Army, and before it the Prussian Army, had existed as a powerful and independent military organization for centuries. The Prussian Army and its backbone, the Prussian officer corps, played an essential role in the German unification with its military campaigns against Denmark, Austria, and France. By the time of the First World War the German Army was a central pillar of the German Reich and, with the Kaiser's collusion, dominated national politics.

For instance, at the outbreak of World War I Germany had no civilian political leadership over its military; indeed, there was not even a national office of Minister of War. Rather, the Kaiser exercised military control over the German Army through the *Prussian* Minister of War, himself a serving general.⁵ Just over twenty years earlier Count Alfred Graf von Waldersee, Chief of the Great German General Staff, had

⁵ John Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power, The German Army in Politics, 1918-1945* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1953) 12 & n.

participated in the political machinations to get rid of Bismarck as Imperial Chancellor.⁶ During the last two years of World War One the German Army leadership ruled the nation itself, selecting and firing civilian political leaders at its leisure.⁷

The German Army leadership continued to influence national politics throughout the Weimar era. This meddling by the German officer corps in politics culminated in the appointment of General Kurt von Schleicher to the post of Chancellor in December, 1932, just weeks before Adolf Hitler was to succeed him in that post.⁸

The dominant role of the German Army in national politics is clear when one considers that the second president of the Weimar Republic was none other than the First World War hero, Field Marshal Paul von Hindenburg. A pillar of German conservatism and a cautious advocate for the restoration of the monarchy, Hindenburg reluctantly appointed Hitler to the post of chancellor in January, 1933.⁹ By the time of his death nineteen months later the military hero and political leader left no doubts as to his faith in National Socialism. In final his political testament, which may have been altered after his death, Hindenburg wrote,

My Chancellor, Adolf Hitler, and his movement have together led the German nation above all professional and class distinctions, to internal Unity- a decided step of historical importance.¹⁰

⁶ Walter Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff: 1657-1945* (Brian Battershaw, Trans.), (Boulder: Westview Press, 1953) (see Chapter V).

⁷ Trevor N. Dupuy, *A Genius for War, The German Army and General Staff, 1807-1945* (New York: Military Book Club, 1977) 167.

⁸ Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power*, 266.

⁹ John Wheeler-Bennett, *Hindenburg, The Wooden Titan* (London: Macmillan & Company Limited, 1936) 433-4.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 470-3.

Unlike the Soviet generals of the Second World War, Hitler's senior military leadership was made up mostly of officers from aristocratic or upper middle class families. The noble preposition 'von' was common among German officers, though not universal. Franz Halder and Heinz Guderian, two of Hitler's Chiefs of the General Staff, were both from middle class families with long military traditions¹¹. The General Staff itself, once a firm bastion of nobility, had drawn fewer and fewer titled officers into its ranks during the Weimar Republic. To give the organization back its old imperial luster Hitler's first Chief of the General Staff, Ludwig Beck, recruited titled officers once again. By 1938, 50 out of 187 General Staff officers were titled compared with only 10 percent of the Army as a whole.¹²

While the Red Army was very much a creature of the Bolshevik Revolution and dominated by the Soviet political leadership since its creation, the German Army had a long established military tradition as well as an important, although dubious, role in German politics. The German Army remained a bastion of traditional German conservatism and, unlike the sweeping away of old institutions in Russia Hitler had had to make an alliance with its leaders in order to secure his regime. Hitler recognized in the German Army a formidable force that could either block his path to power through armed might, or serve as his basis for future military conquest. For the German Army's part Hitler promised the one thing all officers wanted- rearmament and a chance to rectify the faults of the Versailles Treaty. It was a symbiotic relationship in which both parties believed that the promise of political alliance outweighed the perils. Out the outset of

¹¹ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 248; Russell A. Hart, *Guderian, Panzer Pioneer or Myth Maker?* (Dulles: Potomac Books, Inc., 2006), 5.

¹² Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 292-3.

this relationship the German Army enjoyed an independence and political leverage over the regime that was not present with the Red Army. This of course would change.

The Road to War

The evolution of command systems and the tightening of political control over both the Red Army and the German Army during the 1930s began a process of political/military relations that was still unresolved during Second World War. Restructuring of military commands in relation to the dictators and the purging of various officers determined which generals had Hitler and Stalin's ear during the war.

At the heart of the German Army was the German General Staff, an operational planning and senior command organization. The General Staff had been created in the wake of Prussian defeats during the Napoleonic Wars by German officers who sought to "institutionalize military excellence." It was a school and a service that created technical expertise in the field of military science in its officers.¹³ The General Staff rose to prominence under Field Marshal Count Helmuth von Moltke during the Wars of Unification and the post of Chief of the General Staff became the premier military office under the Kaiser.¹⁴ The loss of the First World War and the subsequent bureaucratization of the military leadership under the Weimar Republic served to separate the Chief of the General Staff, re-titled Chief of the Troop Office, from the President.¹⁵

¹³ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 5.

¹⁴ Kenneth Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War, the Myth of German Military Superiority* (New York: Greenhill Books, 1966), 39-41.

¹⁵ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 198, 212.

By the time of the Third Reich the General Staff was producing first rate technicians in the art of war, but few real leaders. These were men who clearly understood the operational and tactical levels of warfare, but did not fully appreciate the strategic level. As English professor and historian John Mosier has stated, the officers produced at this time were great captains, but not great generals. Their plans called for winning the next battle or campaign, but not necessarily the war. Further, Mosier states that they were dominated by Hitler not only because of their own political naiveté, but because the Führer was the only true strategic thinker in the German military.¹⁶

This lack of strategic vision began with the failure of Erich Ludendorff to see beyond the next big push. By the time of his Western Front offensives in early 1918 he incorrectly assumed that the presence of black colonial troops in the Allied lines meant that those powers were on their last legs. So the offensives went grinding forward with the Chief of Staff Hindenburg and his First Quartermaster General Ludendorff convinced that the next blow to the allies would win the war for Germany.¹⁷ Once again, this reflects the limited strategic thinking of two leaders. With America in the war the resources and manpower pouring into Europe were boundless and Allied morale greatly improved. Thus, even as Hindenburg and Ludendorff found themselves as virtual dictators of Germany, the decline of the Great General Staff had begun with their failure.

This lack of strategic vision among Hitler's generals and Hitler's increasing meddling with operational and tactical details proved to be critical setbacks for the German Army during the Second World War. Hitler's own experience as a corporal on

¹⁶ John Mosier, *Cross of Iron, The Rise and Fall of the German War Machine, 1918-1945* (New York: Henry Holt & Company, 2006), 44.

¹⁷ John Lee, *The Warlords, Hindenburg and Ludendorff* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2005), 169.

the Western Front during World War One hardly prepared him for the technical military operational planning that was the hallmark of the General Staff. As Führer, Hitler often wore a plain SA uniform that reflected his status as the political army's Commander-in-Chief. After his appointment as chancellor in 1933 he mostly wore standard suits, but after a meeting the next year with Mussolini, in which the Italian dictator was decked out in military style dress, the SA uniform was seen more and more often.¹⁸

When Hitler publicly announced German rearmament in 1935 Ludwig Beck, the Chief of the Troop Office and General of Artillery, formally assumed the traditional title of Chief of the General Staff.¹⁹ It is useful to view the evolution of Hitler's command structure through this office. During the First World War the Chief of the General Staff had been the premier Army officer serving under the Kaiser. Unlike in the days of the empire, however, the Chief of Staff under the Third Reich no longer had direct access to the Head of State.

In the office of Führer, Hitler had amalgamated the posts of Chancellor and President, thus giving him the role of Commander-in-Chief of Germany's armed forces.²⁰ Directly beneath him in the chain of command was the War Minister, a post held until 1938 by Field Marshal Werner von Blomberg. The War Minister had authority over the heads of the three services branches, the Army (*Heers*), the Air Force (*Luftwaffe*), and the Navy (*Kriegsmarine*). Between the War Minister and the Commanders-in-Chief of the services, the War Minister employed a personal military command staff, the

¹⁸ Richard Overy, *The Dictators, Hitler's Germany, Stalin's Russia* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2004), 441; Robert O. Paxton, *The Anatomy of Fascism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2004), 216.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 236-7.

²⁰ Article 47 of the Weimar Constitution reads in part, "The President... has supreme command over the whole of the defense force of the Federation."

Wehrmachtamt, or Defense Office. The officer commanding this office, usually Wilhelm Keitel or Walther von Reichenau, was responsible for coordinating the commands of the services with the orders of the War Minister.²¹

With the High Command of the Army, *Oberkommando des Heers*, or OKH, the highest post was that of Commander-in-Chief, held until 1938 by General Werner von Fritsch. It was only at this level, separated from the Head of State by three other officers that the Chief of the General Staff's authority began. In fact, Beck only met with Hitler in his formal capacity on two occasions.²² The days had passed when the Chief of the General Staff acted as the *de facto* Commander-in-Chief of Germany's armed forces while the Head of State was content to merely look the part.

Despite the military command structure that had evolved through the Republic into that which served the Third Reich, Beck saw the General Staff under von Moltke as the model to emulate. Panzer specialist Heinz Guderian, himself a later Chief of the General Staff, described Beck as a disciple of Moltke who strove to recreate the organization as it existed under his idol.²³ Indeed, so great was Moltke's influence on Beck that the Polish military attaché in Berlin reportedly remarked of him, "C'est Moltke, lui-même," ("It's Moltke, he's the same.")²⁴

Beck's desire to see the General Staff attain a status similar to that of its earlier incarnation rested on a fundamental assumption that proved a major source of contention

²¹ Joel Hayward, *Adolf Hitler and Joint Warfare* (New Zealand Defense Force Military Studies Institute, 2005), 7, www.joelhayward.org/adolfhitlerandjointw.htm.

²² Robert O'Neil, *Fritsch, Beck, and the Führer* (From *Hitler's Generals*), (Corelli Barnett, Ed.), (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 28.

²³ Heinz Guderian, *Panzer Leader* (Constantine Fitzgibbon, Trans.), (New York: De Capo Press, 1952), 32.

²⁴ Görnitz, *Keitel, Jodl, and Warlimont* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 155.

in German military circles throughout World War Two. Beck's assumption was that in any future conflict the German Army would be the supreme war authority. Beck, along with other senior officers such as Franz Halder and Walther von Brauchitsch, believed that as a European continental power the Army was the most important branch of the armed services. These officers saw the Navy and Air Force as simply "auxiliary forces" to the Army.²⁵ In the event of war Beck wanted the supreme operational command for the Army. Not every officer, however, agreed with this point of view.

During the First World War the problems of planning, operations, and command between the army and navy became evident. By the time of Hindenburg's term as Chief of the General Staff civilian political authority over control of the war was beginning to wane. As Hindenburg's deputy, Ludendorff had championed the naval plan to launch unrestricted submarine warfare against England, despite the wider political and diplomatic ramifications to Germany. Being an army officer, Ludendorff's faith in the navy's plan was based on hope instead of a real understanding of the naval strategy.²⁶ In the mid 1930s many German officers felt that a supreme interservice military executive authority needed to be constituted. Such an authority would be better suited to war planning and operational command than simply having the army, admittedly the most important branch in central European Germany, elevated to an executive role over the Luftwaffe and the Kriegsmarine. Alfred Jodl, another artillery man, was one of these officers.

²⁵ Ibid., 146.

²⁶ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 51.

Jodl believed that the role of the General Staff had significantly changed from the organization that had served the Kaisers. Planning for future wars was the purview of the General Staff, Jodl judged, but once war began another authority should provide command and direction. Under this authority the General Staff would become a sort of 'Leader's Assistant' which had no independent command authority. Hitler seemed to lend weight to this concept as he reportedly told intimates that the General Staff was "just a club of intellectuals."²⁷

Even Blomberg, the Defense Minister, believed that there was a need for an executive military power in the event of war. Like Jodl he felt that the days of the army dominating warfare were over.²⁸ Together with Keitel, the chief of the Wehrmachtamt, Blomberg advocated the creation of a Wehrmacht Operations Staff to act as a single overall command for all three branches. These officers liked the idea of a military generalissimo over this new staff, a sort of interservice Commander-in-Chief, who would be responsible directly to the Head of State during wartime.²⁹

While receptive to the idea of a Wehrmacht Operations Staff, Hitler rejected the concept of a generalissimo, perhaps because he saw in the proposed position a potential rival. Memories of the Kaiser being sidelined by Hindenburg and Ludendorff during the last war were still fresh. Hitler preferred the vagueness in spheres of command that a new Operations Staff would share with the traditional General Staff. In running the military with the same feudal approach he'd taken in governing the party, Hitler ensured

²⁷ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 294.

²⁸ Görlitz, *Blomberg (From Hitler's Generals)*, 135.

²⁹ Görlitz, *Keitel, Jodl, and Warlimont (From Hitler's Generals)*, 146.

Germany's armed forces would never attain a truly unified interservice command structure.³⁰

Undoubtedly the officers who supported the Operations Staff concept were correct. In an age that was rapidly approaching mass bombing raids, extended U-boat campaigns, and intercontinental supply and support missions, to say nothing of battlefield coordination, an interservice command authority only made sense. Beck's romantic idea of the General Staff as the supreme military authority under the Head of State had been overtaken by new technology and new strategic concepts in the application of that technology, as well as the political realities of the Third Reich in which departmental ambiguity was a central feature of Hitler's rule.

For Hitler's part he came to resent his officer corps for their caution, their political conservatism, and their power as a potential rival to the regime. In an address to young men aspiring to become army officers Hitler said,

Every German with the privilege of bearing arms, who is physically and mentally healthy, and has not been punished by law, has all the qualifications necessary for becoming an officer.³¹

Nowhere in this statement does Hitler mention intelligence, discipline, talent, or hard work- hallmarks of German military professionalism. Instead Hitler offers as criteria the bare minimum of standards- you must be German, healthy, and not a criminal.

While Hitler's contempt for the officer class perhaps went back to his days as an enlisted man in World War One, it no doubt increased after his decision to remilitarize the Rhineland in March, 1936. While Hitler gambled on the assumption that England and

³⁰ Ibid.

³¹ John Laffin, *Jackboot, A History of the German Soldier, 1713-1945* (New York: Barnes & Noble Books, 1965), 182.

France would not go to war over the move, generals like Fritsch and Beck strongly advised against it. After this event Hitler believed that his senior generals were all hopeless pessimists who lacked courage.³²

The year 1938 proved to be a critical year in the development of Hitler's command relationship with his Army. A major crisis rocked the military structure early in the year that ended with two of its leaders toppled. Shortly after Defense Minister von Blomberg's wedding in January, Hermann Göring found evidence that his much younger and lower-class wife had been a prostitute. This was doubly embarrassing as the Führer and Air Minister has been witnesses to the wedding.³³ Within days of this bombshell, Commander-in-Chief of the Army von Fritsch found himself falsely accused of homosexuality, a criminal charge under paragraph 175 of the Reich criminal code and grounds for dismissal from the service.³⁴ Within weeks of the revelations Blomberg had resigned and Fritsch stepped down pending an army inquiry.

The Blomberg-Fritsch Affair, as it came to be known, was completely unexpected by the Nazi leadership and Hitler dreaded the public relations implications. With the vulgar reasons for the two generals' dismissals Hitler gained a new level of contempt for the army leadership. The army as a whole felt the same way and thus Hitler was able to tie the army rank and file more closely to him.³⁵ Guderian wrote in his memoirs that

³² Gordon A. Craig, *The Politics of the Prussian Army, 1640-1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1956), 486.

³³ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 312.

³⁴ Heinze Höhne, *The Order of the Death's Head: The Story of Hitler's SS* (Hamburg: Verlag der Spiegel, 1966), 247; Williamson Murray, *Werner Freiherr von Fritsch- Der Tragische General* (From *Die Militärelite Des Dritten Reiches*) (Ronald Smelser, Enrico Syring, Eds.), (Berlin: Verlag Ullstein GmbH, 1995), 166-7.

³⁵ Ian Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945, Nemesis* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2000), 57-60.

given the circumstances Blomberg's treatment was entirely appropriate but that Fritsch had been railroaded.³⁶

Fritsch's dismissal was more complicated as the Chief of the General Staff stood behind him. Beck, whose early admiration for Hitler had since turned to contempt, urged Fritsch to resist when Hitler demanded the Commander-in-Chief's resignation. Beck pressed Fritsch to arrest the Führer and promised him the support of the General Staff, regardless of its oath to Hitler. Fearing that a coup would not be successful, as well as attaching himself to the odium of mutiny, Fritsch refused Beck's entreaties.³⁷ Fritsch resigned and was never reinstated to his former position. He was killed by sniper fire during the Polish campaign in September, 1939.³⁸

Hitler was left with a dilemma as Fritsch had been the obvious replacement for Blomberg. Most likely it was Goebbels who suggested that Hitler take over the post of Defense Minister himself. With this advice the Propaganda Minister no doubt hoped to block his rival Göring from taking over the Defense Ministry. Hitler took the advice, naming himself head of the new Wehrmacht, and raised each of the heads of the service branches to a ministerial position. For the sake of public relations Hitler stated that he had intended to do this all along but the Blomberg-Fritsch Affair had hastened his timetable.³⁹

On February 4, 1938, Hitler issued a decree concerning the leadership of the Wehrmacht, (*Erlass über die Führung der Wehrmacht*):

³⁶ Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 47-8.

³⁷ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 243.

³⁸ O'Neill, *Fritsch, Beck, and the Führer* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 35.

³⁹ Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 57-60.

I shall personally assume command of the entire Wehrmacht henceforth. The present Chief of the Wehrmacht Office in the Reich Ministry of War shall assume its responsibilities as the 'High Command of the Wehrmacht' (*Oberkommando der Wehrmacht, OKW*). As my military staff it shall be placed under my immediate control.... On my behalf, the Chief of the High Command of the Wehrmacht shall be granted authority previously accorded to the Reich Minister of War...⁴⁰

With this decree Hitler assumed the powers of the Reich Minister of Defense. Keitel, Chief of Staff of OKW, now achieved a ministerial post, though he only served essentially as a glorified adjutant to Hitler. The OKW itself was now Hitler's personal military command staff.⁴¹ Over the course of the war that began the next year, OKW and OKH (High Command of the Army, which included the General Staff), would be pitted against each other in Hitler's Byzantine power structure.

The creation of OKW as Hitler's direct military staff represented perhaps the greatest blow to the status and power of the General Staff since the Treaty of Versailles. Now competing with this rival agency, on paper at least the General Staff's influence had grown. The chain of command now went from Hitler as Head of State, to Hitler as Chief of the Wehrmacht, to the newly appointed Walther von Brauchitsch as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, to Beck as Chief of the General Staff. Now only one office stood between the Chief of the General Staff and Hitler. For all that the creation of OKW blunted the superficial advantages.

The rest of the year 1938 saw Hitler attaining bloodless victories over Austria and the Czech Sudetenland. Those generals who found Hitler's foreign policy adventures reckless were cowed by each such coup. One exception, the Chief of the General Staff,

⁴⁰ Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations, 1932-1945, The Chronicle of a Dictatorship, Volume II* (Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 1992)

⁴¹ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 276.

Ludwig Beck, resigned during the Munich Crisis over fears that it would lead to war with England and France. Beck had been flirting with opposition to Hitler and eventually became one of the Army's principle figures of resistance. In 1938, however, if Beck hoped his resignation would encourage other officers to follow in protest, he was disappointed. Instead, Hitler continued to dominate his generals.⁴²

As these events were playing out in the German Army officers like Heinz Guderian and his superior Oswald Lutz were developing mobile armor tactics for the next war. Their hope was to reintroduce mobility onto the battlefield after the disastrous attrition of World War One.⁴³ This desire to create a new *Bewegungskrieg*, or war of movement, came to be called in modern parlance *Blitzkrieg*.⁴⁴

Similar ideas for mobile warfare and armored tactics were being floated in Soviet military circles. For a time, the Soviet doctrine, called *Glubokii boi*, Deep Battle or Deep Operations, was embraced by Stalin. Before long, however, chief proponents of this new warfare were consumed in the fires of the Soviet leader's purges.

As Secretary General of the Communist Party, Stalin had no direct authority over the Red Army during the 1930s. Nevertheless Stalin was certainly the leader of the Soviet military as he was the undisputed head of the Communist Party and the Soviet state. At this time Stalin held no military rank, nor did he have the same Commander-in-Chief status that Hitler enjoyed towards his military, yet still his word was law within the

⁴² Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 246.

⁴³ Hart, *Guderian*, 28-9.

⁴⁴ Robert M. Citino, *Death of the Wehrmacht, The German Campaigns of 1942* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 4-5.

Red Army.⁴⁵ With the Red Army supposedly part of the larger Soviet experiment, Stalin interfered unapologetically in military matters. Unlike Germany under the Nazis, the Soviet Union in the 1930s was a society where most citizens were completely isolated from the outside world. A central part of this isolationism was the idea that Stalin could do no wrong. The idea of Stalin's moral supremacy had a devastating result within the Red Army.⁴⁶

Stalin had a love/hate relationship with the Red Army during the 1930s. He valued the institution as a political force for communist education, and perhaps even looked upon it with the traditional pride of the statesman toward his military. Like Hitler, however, Stalin also harbored a deep distrust of his generals. This came about as a result of his experiences during the Civil War with former Tsarist officers that Lenin had insisted were necessary to build Soviet Communism, at least in the short term.⁴⁷

During the Civil War Stalin had served as a political officer attached to major formations of the Red Army and had gained a reputation as an inflexible and harsh figure with little regard for the lives of soldiers. He often ordered ill prepared counter-attacks and called for the dismissal of commanders less reckless than himself.⁴⁸ His careless use of Red Army troops drew ire from Lenin and the Central Committee in Moscow, but his results ensured his continued position. From 1918 Stalin affected a military style dress

⁴⁵ John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad, Stalin's War with Germany, Volume One* (London: Cassell, 1975), 15.

⁴⁶ Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 30.

⁴⁷ David M. Glantz & Jonathan House, *When Titan's Clashed, How the Red Army Stopped Hitler* (Lawrence: University of Kansas Press, 1995), 6, 11; Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 75-6.

⁴⁸ Overy, *Russia's War*, 2.

and began carrying a gun. Though he had no technical military training, Stalin enjoyed playing the part of general.⁴⁹

One such commander who resented Stalin's recklessness with Red Army troops was Mikhail Tukhachevsky, a brilliant officer who drew Stalin's ire when, during the Soviet invasion of Poland in 1920, the army under their joint command failed to take Warsaw. Each man blamed the other for the lack of cavalry units and the subsequent disaster.⁵⁰

During the late 1920s and early 1930s Tukhachevsky and other officers began to develop a new theory of armored warfare that closely paralleled the German *Bewegungskrieg* tactics. Drawing on lessons from the 1920 failure in Poland and Ludendorff's failures in 1918, Tukhachevsky and Soviet military theorist V. K. Triandafillov created the concept of Deep Operations. This new form of warfare called for massive penetrations of the enemy line by infantry and armor in concert with artillery and planes. With projected penetrations of over one hundred kilometers, the Soviet force would then exploit the enemy's disarray and confusion and deny it the opportunity to reform their lines. Perhaps the important idea within the concept of Deep Operations was the theory of Operational Art. Operational Art proposed, in a practical, command-oriented way, that senior officers interpret the means to achieve strategic results through military operations and battle tactics. This theory gave a new importance and power to senior officers that eventually put the Red Army leadership at odds with Stalin.⁵¹

⁴⁹ Robert Service, *Stalin, A Biography* (Cambridge: Belknap Harvard, 2004), 167, 170.

⁵⁰ Ian Kershaw, *Fateful Choices, Ten Decisions that Changed the World, 1940-1941* (New York: Penguin Press, 2007), 247.

⁵¹ Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 7-10.

Stalin initially supported this concept and diverted much of the Soviet Union's resources to defense, particularly tank production.⁵² Indeed, Stalin was so taken with the necessity of rearmament that he appointed Tukhachevsky Chief of Armaments, a position in which he surrounded himself with military modernizers and believers of Deep Operations.⁵³

Stalin's paranoia and fear of potential rivals came to full flower in mid 1936 when mass arrests of citizens in the upper strata of Soviet society began. For the next two years senior and mid-level communists alike shared the fear of denunciation, arrest, prison, torture and death.⁵⁴ Of the 1,966 delegates to the 17th Party Congress in 1934, the so-called 'Congress of Victors' for its achievement in the field of industry, 1,108 were shot only a few years later.⁵⁵ Stalin was liquidating anyone that posed a threat to his stranglehold of power, and no institution posed a greater potential threat to Stalin's rule than the Red Army.

The mid 1930s had witnessed a growing institutional independence for the Red Army. In early 1934 dual command between military commanders and political commissars was abolished. The need for rigid oversight of former Tsarist technical experts was no longer deemed necessary, relegating the commissar to a mere advisory role. Additionally, old army ranks were reintroduced, excluding that of general, in 1935.⁵⁶ This new independence for the Red Army produced a powerful and dangerous rival for Stalin and the Soviet dictator included the military in his wider program of repression and terror.

⁵² Ibid.

⁵³ Overy, *The Dictators*, 469-70.

⁵⁴ Fitzpatrick, *The Russian Revolution*, 165.

⁵⁵ Robert Conquest, *The Great Terror, A Reassessment* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 31.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 185-6.

In 1936 Tukhachevsky and Stalin's crony Kliment Voroshilov were promoted to the new rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union along with three other officers.

Tukhachevsky was named First Deputy Commissar of Defense, serving under the incompetent Voroshilov. When Tukhachevsky's circle of military followers attempted to oust Voroshilov from his position that same year, it represented an entirely new level of military initiative and power in relation to the party.⁵⁷ Stalin recognized this.

As in all important matters of state, Stalin believed that his ideas must be pre-eminent within the Red Army. He resented Tukhachevsky's encouragement of creative thinking and the Operational Art among officers, seeing in it the seeds of treason. At one point in 1934 Stalin even refused Tukhachevsky permission to teach his new theories to other officers. Tukhachevsky's outspokenness and his public views about an eventual German invasion of the Soviet Union further angered Stalin and ensured that when the Soviet dictator moved against the Red Army the marshal would be the first to suffer.⁵⁸

Toward the end of 1936 the NKVD began the preparatory work for the purge of the military. Arrests and torture were common in the quest to link officers with treasonous plots. On May 22 of the following year Tukhachevsky was arrested and, with Stalin's instruction, tortured. Over the next few days nearly one thousand senior officers and political commissars were arrested.⁵⁹

Unlike the previous purges against the regime's supposed political enemies, the purge against the Red Army leadership came in a sudden, shocking blow, without any

⁵⁷ Overy, *The Dictators*, 470.

⁵⁸ Shimon Naveh, *Tukhachevsky (From Stalin's Generals)*, (Harold Shukman, Ed.), (New York: Grove Press, 1993), 266-7.

⁵⁹ Robert Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler, The Age of Social Catastrophe* (New York: Alfred E. Knopf, 2007), 275.

propaganda buildup. The sudden announcement of treachery among the senior officers and their speedy executions lent itself to the rouse that there had been an actual and imminent military coup that required quick, decisive action. In addition to Tukhachevsky, victims of the purge included the commanders of two military districts, the head of the Military Academy, the head of the Red Army Administration, the head of the Red Army Political Administration, and many others.⁶⁰ Mid-level victims included virtually every one of sixty-seven corps commanders. In many cases the families of the executed victims were also tried and shot. In all over 33,000 officers were relieved of command, with at least 7,000 of them arrested.⁶¹

A few weeks before Tukhachevsky's arrest the principle of dual command had been reinstated. The Red Army's move toward a more independent institutional status was curtailed as political commissars were once again given shared responsibilities with military commanders.⁶² This, in concert with the purges, firmly placed control of the Red Army back into the hands of Communist Party, which itself was firmly in the hands of Josef Stalin. For the next few years the purges continued on a much smaller scale as a reminder to those officers who still longed for greater institutional independence for the Red Army.⁶³

Thus we see by the time of the outbreak of the Second World War Stalin had effectively gutted the Red Army of those with combat experience and military education. The force that was left was entirely cowed and lived in fear of Stalin's dreaded NKVD.

⁶⁰ Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 182, 187.

⁶¹ Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler*, 275.

⁶² Conquest, *The Great Terror*, 194.

⁶³ Overy, *The Dictators*, 481.

As a political body tied to the great Soviet experiment, there was not room in the Red Army for true military talents like Tukhachevsky. Stalin's purges created a crisis in higher military leadership that would not be corrected until well into the Great Patriotic War when the Soviet Union was fighting for its very existence.

The practical applications of Deep Operations, which in fact were not only mirrored in Germany but also to a lesser extent in France and England, took a backseat to Stalin's political considerations. At the time of the purges Stalin either didn't feel that a German attack was imminent or he believed that Soviet defenses were strong enough to repel an invader without Tukhachevsky's military innovations. The marshal's arrest occurred over two years before the German Blitzkrieg victories in Poland and France. Given his lack of military technical expertise, his own amateurish performance during the Civil War, and his willingness to execute his most brilliant military leader, Stalin perhaps believed that the next war would be not terribly dissimilar from World War One and the Civil War in terms of battlefield operations.

Years before Stalin was executing the officers behind the new armored tactics, Hitler was telling his armored specialists, "That is what I need."⁶⁴ Like the Soviet Union, the Nazi regime had its tensions with the Army, and though Hitler may have rhetorically ranted about doing away with his generals, in fact only two, the erstwhile chancellor von Schleicher and his compatriot Kurt von Bredow, were murdered before the war. The conditions under which these two generals were killed bear some resemblance to the conditions under which Tukhachevsky and the Soviet officers were executed. Schleicher

⁶⁴ Hart, *Guderian*, 32.

and Bredow were gunned down by SS execution squads during the 1934 Night of the Long Knives, Hitler's settling of accounts with Ernst Röhm and the SA leadership. Hitler justified his actions under the pretence that the SA was preparing for an imminent coup and therefore swift action had to be taken to protect the state. Stalin's sudden arrest and execution of the Red Army leadership in 1937 was explained exactly the same way, with Tukhachevsky playing the role of Röhm.⁶⁵

To be sure, there were important differences between the Soviet and Nazi military murders. Just as in the Soviet case, the murder of Schleicher and Bredow took place within the larger context of Nazi political housecleaning. The Nazi move, however, was directed against the SA, a major rival of the German Army. In fact, Hitler's purge of the radical wing of his own party was a conciliatory move toward the Army. For the most part, German Army officers accepted the deaths of the two generals as the price of doing business and gave it no more thought. Two exceptions were the aged Field Marshal von Mackensen who believed the honor of the Army was at stake, and former Army Commander-in-Chief General Hammerstein-Equord, who was a friend of the murdered officers. The two men objected loudly to the killings until Hitler admitted privately to a select group of generals that the murders had been a mistake.⁶⁶

By contrast, the Soviet purge was directed against the Red Army leadership in a move to subordinate the military to the party and recreate the political/military relationship of the Civil War era. This was not a move to placate the Red Army, but to

⁶⁵ Wheeler-Bennett, *The Nemesis of Power*, 322-4.

⁶⁶ Laffin, *Jackboot*, 172.

dominate it. Additionally, no figures such as Mackensen and Hammerstein-Equord appeared in the Soviet Union to speak up for those unjustly murdered.

This tells volumes about the two regimes and their relationship to their militaries. Before the war both dictators walked a tightrope with their military leadership. Both required the power of strong armies for purposes of defense, real and perceived, and to prepare for their aggressive adventures. Where Hitler's regime negotiated an alliance with the German Army, however, Stalin's regime simply smashed those elements in the Red Army that it feared. For all their differences, however, both the Nazi purge and the Soviet purge bound the militaries much tighter to the dictators.

With the arrival of the Second World War these political/military relationships had profound consequences. Hitler's co-opting of the German Army allowed him to conquer virtually all of continental Europe despite his divide-and-conquer methods of command. Stalin's decapitation of the Red Army led to military disaster in Finland and catastrophe two years later as German panzers rolled across Soviet plains.

CHAPTER 3

PRELUDE TO THE EASTERN FRONT

Hitler's Victories

The relationship of the two dictators to their military leaderships intensified in 1939 as both Nazi Germany and the Soviet Union embarked upon wars of aggression. For Hitler this meant military triumph in Poland and Western Europe despite his divided command arrangement with his generals. For Stalin it meant military humiliation at the hands of a small arctic nation which everyone expected to quickly surrender. The first two years of World War Two had a profound impact on the later war in Russia and illustrate the evolving command systems that would come head to head in 1941.

General Franz Halder became Chief of the General Staff after Beck's departure in 1938. As a Bavarian, and therefore thought to be a Catholic, Hitler had only reluctantly allowed Halder to be Beck's deputy on the General Staff. A General of Artillery, like so many others in the army leadership, Halder soon proved himself an intelligent and capable Chief of the General Staff.⁶⁷

Halder shared many of Beck's critical views of Hitler's military policies. Indeed, he told Brauchitsch after the Commander-in-Chief had asked him to take on the post that

⁶⁷ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 248-9.

he was just as opposed to Hitler's reckless foreign policy as was Beck, and like his predecessor he intended to fight it.⁶⁸

On March 24, 1939 Britain and France issued their guarantee to Poland. One week later Halder was ordered by Hitler to oversee the preparation by the General Staff of a plan for the invasion of Poland.⁶⁹ The army ran the Polish campaign with minimal interference from Hitler. On occasion Hitler made suggestions to Brauchitsch and Halder, but never gave direct orders. In fact Halder reported that during the operation he never had one telephone conversation with Hitler or OKW in an operational capacity.⁷⁰ For Halder this was as it should have been- the General Staff engaged in its traditional role of war planning and execution. This showed little of the problems that were to develop the next year as OKW began its expansion into war planning at Hitler's order. For the first time and the last time in the war an operation was to be handled exclusively by OKH, not to some degree by OKW.⁷¹

In his memoirs Field Marshal Erich von Manstein noted that it was after the fall of Poland that OKH and the General Staff, were eclipsed by OKW as Hitler's primary war policy agency. This stemmed from Hitler's desire to attack France before winter and the little enthusiasm that OKH showed for the decision.⁷² By the conclusion of the Polish campaign Hitler ordered the invasion of the west as a directive not through OKH, but through OKW, though the newly created agency was not prepared to plan an operation of this magnitude. This represented a humiliating downgrading of standing for Brauchitsch,

⁶⁸ Görnitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 331.

⁶⁹ Moiser, *Cross of Iron*, 123.

⁷⁰ Brian Bond, *Brauchitsch* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 80.

⁷¹ Görnitz, *Keitel, Jodl, & Warlimont* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 158.

⁷² Erich von Manstein, *Lost Victories* (St. Paul: Zenith Press, 1955) 71.

and by extension Halder. The two went from being senior military advisors to mere functionaries charged with carrying out another agency's war plans.⁷³ Hitler's frustration grew into outright disdain for the army leadership. At one meeting Hitler remarked to those around as Brauchitsch entered the room, "Here comes my Coward number one." When Halder followed Hitler said, "Number two." He also lectured the officers on the defeatist "spirit of Zossen."⁷⁴ By this time clearly the Chief of the General's Staff's star was beginning to fall with Hitler.

About this time General Stüpnagel, a Hitler resister of the Beck school, approached Halder about joining the clandestine opposition. Halder, perhaps seeking a neutral way to decline, refused to join without the complicity of Brauchitsch. He also refused Stüpnagel's advice to arrest the Commander-in-Chief of the Army if he failed to go along with the conspirators. By early November Halder had lost his stomach for serious intrigue against Hitler. At a meeting on the 5th Hitler singled out the General Staff for its timidity, which he no doubt equated with treason. Hearing this Halder burned incriminating documents and fired Nazi resisters on the General Staff.⁷⁵ Manstein wrote in his memoirs that Halder's flirtation with the resistance worked against his professional abilities as Chief of the General Staff, and that while it may not have compromised his position in peacetime, it did once the war began.⁷⁶

Halder's flirtation with the resistance to Hitler was easily severed, perhaps because he was never a truly dedicated opponent of the regime. His opposition, such as it

⁷³ Bond, *Brauchitsch* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 81-2.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 82-3.

⁷⁵ Müller, *Witzleben, Stüpnagel, and Speidel* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 53-4.

⁷⁶ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 80-1.

was, probably stemmed more from his battles with OKW and other military and political agencies within the Third Reich than it did from any high minded ideological decency. After Halder's neutral reaction to the atrocities committed in Poland, it is safe to say that his opposition to Hitler was not based on disgust over the mass killings perpetrated by the SS and German police units.⁷⁷

Manstein said that Halder and Brauchitsch were equals in ability and tended to agree with one another out of a sincere belief in each other's judgment. He goes on to write of the Chief of the General Staff,

Halder had a remarkable grasp of every aspect of staff duties and was a tireless worker into the bargain. A saying of Moltke's 'Genius is diligence,' might well have been his motto. Yet this man hardly glowed with the sacred fire that is said to inspire really great soldiers.⁷⁸

In preparing for the advance into France Halder offered a plan that, on the surface, looked much like Schleiffen's. In fact Halder's plan, titled *Gelb* (Yellow), differed in many ways, not the least of which was its northern advance route and less dynamic scope. Serving as von Rundstedt's Chief of Staff for Army Group A, Erich von Manstein offered an alternative plan that called for armor units penetrating the Ardennes forest region of Belgium and France. This plan was eventually named *Sichelschnitt* (Sickle Cut).⁷⁹ Initially Halder opposed the idea, believing the Ardennes impassable to armor forces, and had even rejected a similar proposal from Hitler himself. However, meticulous technocrat that he was, Halder ordered the plan to be studied.⁸⁰

⁷⁷ Ronald Smelser & Edward Davies II, *The Myth of the Eastern Front: The Nazi-Soviet War in American Popular Culture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 94-5.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 79-80.

⁷⁹ Alistair Horne, *To Lose a Battle, France 1940* (London: Macmillan, 1969), 174-5, 195.

⁸⁰ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 266.

In January, 1940 a chance crash landing by two Luftwaffe officers in Belgian territory led to the Allies obtaining the plans for *Gelb* and requiring Germany to rethink its strategy. By early the next month Hitler, who had been impressed with Manstein's ideas, officially backed *Sichelschnitt*.⁸¹ Halder, the Chief of the General Staff, had watched as his plan was set aside by Hitler in favor of what appeared to be a reckless, risky strategy by a junior staff officer serving in the field.

Meanwhile Hitler's eyes were fixed on Norway. For this operation, slated for April, he kept OKH largely out of the loop. In addition to the work of the OKW Operations Staff, a single army corps HQ was used. Perhaps Hitler selected OKW to plan and carry out this operation precisely because it would require not only army and air force units, but navy as well. After all, OKW was created to act as a supreme inter-service command staff under Hitler. This move was a slap in the face to OKH and Hitler no doubt entrusted OKW with the mission no less for their supposed interservice authority than as a way to insult Brauchitsch, Halder, and the General Staff for their foot dragging the previous fall over the French attack. With bitterness Halder wrote in his diary, "Not a single word passed between the Führer and the Commander-in-Chief of the Army on this subject. Get that on records for the war historians."⁸²

The triumph over France was undoubtedly Germany's greatest victory of the Second World War and it occurred about the same time that Brauchitsch authored a decree calling for closer ties between the Army and the Nazi party.⁸³ The campaign cost

⁸¹ Home, *To Lose a Battle*, 160-1, 192.

⁸² Bond, *Brauchitsch* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 84.

⁸³ Overy, *The Dictators*, 533.

the Germans only 156,000 casualties, and around 30,000 dead.⁸⁴ By the time of France's fall Halder had already begun planning for a peacetime army of twenty-four panzer divisions, twelve motorized divisions, and between thirty and forty other divisions.⁸⁵ In a speech to the Reichstag on July 19, 1940 celebrating the new conquest Hitler elevated twelve officers to the rank of Field Marshal, among them Brauchitsch, Leeb, Keitel, Reichenau, and Rundstedt.⁸⁶ Conspicuously absent from the promotions was Chief of the General Staff Halder. In fact, of the four principal Chiefs of the General Staff during the Third Reich none would rise higher than Colonel-General.

While Halder had not lost the complete confidence of Hitler the relationship between the two was undoubtedly strained. From the Führer's point of view Halder had delayed attacking France immediately following the conquest of Poland, had written off Manstein's plan as unworkable, and was pessimistic about Britain's surrender after the fall of France.⁸⁷

Manstein himself was critical of both Brauchitsch and Halder after the fall of France for not providing a clear strategic plan for ending the war- either through a diplomatic offensive to win the peace, or through military options.⁸⁸ To top it off many younger officers within the General Staff felt that Manstein, whose plan had defeated

⁸⁴ Geoffrey Roberts, *Stalin's Wars, From World War to Cold War, 1939-1953* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 88.

⁸⁵ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 90.

⁸⁶ Earl F. Ziemke, *Rundstedt (From Hitler's Generals)*, 191.

⁸⁷ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 93.

⁸⁸ Field Marshal Lord Carver, *Manstein (From Hitler's Generals)*, 226.

France and who had proved his superior ability with armor operations, should replace Halder.⁸⁹

So even before the great test of Russia, Halder's star was beginning to fade. Halder was undoubtedly a technical expert who competently orchestrated the military will of Hitler. Lacking in a superior strategic vision, however, Halder was dependent upon the one man who began to hold him in such contempt.

Hitler undoubtedly began the war as a strategic thinker, someone who looks at the larger dimensions of the conflict and seeks to win the war, not just the next battle or campaign. Hitler's generals were, by and large, men of great operational talent, but not strategic thinkers in the sense of a Napoleon, an Alexander, or even a Schlieffen. This is a main theme of John Mosier's 2006 book, *Cross of Iron, The Rise and Fall of the German War Machine, 1918-1945*. For the most part Mosier makes a compelling argument, but leaves out the fact that at the time Hitler could be just as prone to wishful thinking and unfounded optimism as Ludendorff. Indeed, after the fall of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad in early 1943 Hitler's strategic sense had seemed to abandon him almost entirely.

Hitler did show a grand strategic view that few if any of his generals possessed. For instance in early 1940 when Guderian briefed Hitler on the plans for his panzer corps' crossing of the Meuse River, long considered the major obstacle in the campaign, Hitler asked, "And then what are you going to do?" This illustrates that Hitler's thinking

⁸⁹ B. H. Liddel Hart, *The German Generals Talk* (New York: Quill, 1948), 114.

was already moving beyond the next battle or the next campaign, but indeed was fixed on crushing France.⁹⁰

Additionally Guderian notes a dinner celebration shortly after the fall of Poland where he was awarded his Knight's Cross. There Hitler quizzed him about his feelings regarding the non-aggression pact with the USSR. Guderian stated that he felt relieved that Germany would not be fighting a two front war. Hitler was visibly disappointed at this answer.⁹¹ Even then Hitler was looking at the invasion of the Soviet Union as the only sure road to building his empire and removing all European threats to it. And as is demonstrated later many of Hitler's decisions during the war in Russia illustrate his strategic understanding of the situation.

Hitler also thought out of the traditional box when it came to strategy. It was Hitler who backed officers who were innovators in their fields. Even before Manstein's *Sichelschnitt* Hitler had come up with a similar idea.⁹² In fact Hitler had backed Guderian's ideas in panzer operations since early 1934.⁹³ He had even encouraged General Kurt Student's attempts to use airborne troops as a way to overcome the Maginot Line and Belgian defenses in the west.⁹⁴ In his desire to *win* the next war, Hitler was open to new ideas that the technical experts were advocating, and he alone was able to merge them into effective new directions.

Hitler was perhaps Germany's greatest strategic thinker, but he lacked the technical brilliance of the trained specialist officer. While he was consumed with the big

⁹⁰ Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 92; Mosier, *Cross of Iron*, 136-7.

⁹¹ Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 84-5.

⁹² Correlli Barnett, introduction to *Hitler's Generals*, 9.

⁹³ Russell Hart, *Guderian*, 32.

⁹⁴ Sir John Hackett, *Student (From Hitler's Generals)*, 467.

picture, he could not see the smaller details with the clarity of a Beck, Halder, Zeitzler, or Guderian. Although his political intuition had served him well in the past, it proved wildly inconsistent during the war. Hitler's belief that one good kick would bring the whole rotten structure of the Soviet Union crashing down begins to sound more and more like Ludendorff's confidence that the western Allies were on their last legs by early 1918. Both men based their political assessments on their hopes, not the reality.

So it appears that Hitler was a strategist and not a technician. Even he was not a strategist of the caliber of Schlieffen, or even Moltke the Younger, however. Hitler was a flawed strategist who, as will be shown, increasingly meddled in the realm of the technician and the specialist with disastrous results.

During the Weimar period von Seeckt selected the officers for the 100,000 man army. In seeking to create a technically competent army along General Staff lines Seeckt had picked officers that were technical specialists in their fields. Often this meant that these officers weren't merely apolitical, but were in fact politically naïve. This was one of the major reasons why Hitler was able to dominate the officer corps as a class so effectively. Nietzsche's concept of *die Herde* adequately describes Hitler's feelings toward those officers who blindly followed him.⁹⁵

Hitler's relationship with the army was always tinged with caution- the army remained throughout the Third Reich the one institution that could conceivably overthrow him. Another way that Hitler bound his generals to him was through outright bribery. Out of a secret Chancellery account Hitler 'rewarded' many of his generals with

⁹⁵ Mosier, *Cross of Iron*, 43-4, 136.

cash gifts. Brauchitsch himself received 80,000 Reichsmarks from Hitler, allowing him to obtain a divorce quietly and marry a new wife and avoid a repetition of the personal drama that had sealed Blomberg's fate.⁹⁶ Guderian received an even larger amount for his service to the Third Reich, perhaps the largest single bribe of any general during the war.⁹⁷ Promotion itself was used as a form of bribery. By the end of the war Hitler had a total of no less than fifty-three field marshals and colonel-generals.⁹⁸

So in addition to their oath, outright bribery kept Hitler's officers bound to the regime. And also, lingering in the shadows, there was the threat of Gestapo action- if not outright arrest then a Fritsch-like blackmail.

Stalin's Setbacks

In addition to the Red Army purge another factor seriously hampered the efficiency of the Soviet military before its entrance into the Second World War- an enormous expansion that was not properly prepared for. In the two and a half years before the German invasion 161 new Red Army divisions had been created. The rapid increase in the number of units meant that by 1941 three-fourths of Red Army officers had held their commissions for less than a year, and ensured that roughly eighty percent of the officers purged three years earlier were reinstated. The Soviet military was one of quantity, not quality.⁹⁹

⁹⁶ Bond, *Brauchitsch* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 77.

⁹⁷ Hart, *Guderian*, 83.

⁹⁸ Barnett, introduction to *Hitler's Generals*, 15

⁹⁹ Overy, *Russia's War*, 31.

As he had no formal command mechanism as yet, Stalin commanded the Red Army in 1939 informally through the People's Commissar of Defense, Kliment Voroshilov. Like Wilhelm Keitel in Germany, Voroshilov was a crony of the dictator without much real military talent.¹⁰⁰ Khrushchev reportedly said of him years later that he was "the biggest bag of shit in the army."¹⁰¹ The Soviet dictator had first met Voroshilov when the two men were delegates to the Fourth Party Congress in Stockholm in 1906 and boarded together at the Hotel Bristol.¹⁰² Essentially, Voroshilov served as Stalin's number one Red Army yes-man in a system that valued political orthodoxy and complete compliance to the dictator's will more than military ability.

During the 18th Party Congress in March, 1939, Voroshilov cited the works of Lenin, Stalin, and von Clausewitz when he made the declaration that the Red Army was invincible.¹⁰³ About the same time Voroshilov concluded, based on the experience of Red Army volunteers in the Spanish Civil War, that there was no need for separate armored units. Rather, tanks were split up among the infantry. Voroshilov concluded that this would increase the defensive capabilities of the Red Army just as the German Army was about to prove its dreaded panzer divisions in the field.¹⁰⁴ This flew in the face of Tukhachevsky's theory of Deep Operations and ensured military disaster later that year. Though the Red Army no doubt gained some prestige by occupying eastern Poland

¹⁰⁰ David M. Glantz, *Colossus Reborn, The Red Army at War, 1941-1943* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 386.

¹⁰¹ Overy, *Russia's War*, 57.

¹⁰² Service, *Stalin*, 61.

¹⁰³ John Erickson, *The Soviet High Command, A Military-Political History, 1918-1941* (London: Frank Cass Publishers, 1962), 511.

¹⁰⁴ Overy, *Russia's War*, 55.

in September in conjunction with the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact, it was far from invincible.

In November 1939 the Red Army went to war. Using border clashes with Finland as a thinly veiled excuse for aggression, the Soviet Union declared war and prepared to demonstrate that in military operations it was every bit the equal of Hitler's Wehrmacht. Shaposhnikov objected to the invasion of Finland on the grounds that the necessary weapons and units were not readily available for the assault. Shaposhnikov's sober concerns were brushed aside by Stalin, who at this point showed no real military understanding at all. Instead, Stalin listened to his crony Voroshilov who insisted that the Leningrad Military District, the military command unit bordering Finland, contained everything the invasion required.¹⁰⁵ The district's commander, Kirill Meretskov, agreed with Shaposhnikov, stating:

The terrain of coming operations is split by lakes, rivers, swamps, and is almost entirely covered by forests.... The proper use of our forces will be difficult. It is criminal to believe that our task will be easy, or only like a march...¹⁰⁶

Even in the light of competent military argument favoring caution from Shaposhnikov and Meretskov, Voroshilov defiantly told Stalin that Soviet tanks would be in Helsinki within a week.¹⁰⁷ Khrushchev later stated, "He (Stalin) was sure all we had to

¹⁰⁵ William R. Trotter, *A Frozen Hell, The Russo-Finnish War of 1939-40* (Chapel Hill: Algonquin Books of Chapel Hill, 1991), 34.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid.

¹⁰⁷ Charles D. Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia* (Oxford: Osprey Publishing Ltd., 2007), 36.

do was fire a few artillery rounds and the Finns would capitulate. Instead, they rejected our terms and resisted.”¹⁰⁸

The war against Finland was a military disaster, a sharp contrast to Germany’s lighting victory over Poland only a few months earlier. Voroshilov planned the operation along with another Stalin crony, Lev Mekhlis, who was a party propagandist and not a military man.¹⁰⁹ The two men had not even consulted Soviet intelligence for maps of the invasion area.¹¹⁰ The Soviets attacked Finland with nearly 1.2 million men, 1,500 tanks, and 3,000 aircraft. The Finnish defense was much tougher than the proponents of the attack expected and leadership of Red Army units in the field left much to be desired. Coordination between Soviet formations was dreadful. Casualties were high and the Finn’s Mannereheim Line was nowhere breached.¹¹¹

Stalin was appalled. He said,

Why aren’t we advancing? Ineffective military operations may hurt our policies. The whole world is watching us. The authority of the Red Army is the guarantee of the USSR’s security. If we get bogged down for a long time in the face of such a weak adversary, we will encourage the anti-Soviet forces of the imperialist circles.¹¹²

Khrushchev recalled a scene in late December where Stalin and Voroshilov hurled blame for the debacle toward each other. The argument culminated in the Defense Commissar throwing a platter carrying a stuffed pig across the table.¹¹³ Stalin quickly took charge of

¹⁰⁸ William Taubman, *Khrushchev, The Man and His Era* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2003), 141.

¹⁰⁹ John Lukacs, *The Last European War, September 1939- December 1941* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), 270.

¹¹⁰ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*, 66.

¹¹¹ Roberts, *Stalin’s Wars*, 50.

¹¹² Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment, Russia, The USSR, and the Successor States* (Oxford: University Press, 1998), 304.

¹¹³ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*, 203-4.

the military situation by dismissing Voroshilov from overall command of the operation and appointing Semon Timoshenko to crack the Finnish defenses. Meretskov was demoted to command the 7th Army. January was a month for regrouping and preparing a new mass assault with a half a million soldiers.¹¹⁴ The attack commenced in mid-February and the Mannerheim Line was breached, compelling Finland to sue for peace.

Stalin's hopes of spreading Soviet style communism were dashed when the Finnish Communist Party abandoned its solidarity with Moscow and joined the struggle against the USSR. Stalin was forced to create a new Finnish Soviet government that he hoped to put in place in Helsinki.¹¹⁵ Stalin was forced to abandon installing his puppet regime in Finland because he feared this would stiffen Finnish resistance and protract the struggle, giving Britain and France or even Germany time to intervene in what he hoped to keep a localized conflict.¹¹⁶

The fighting was costly and exposed the weakness of the Red Army to the world. One Red Army officer supposedly lamented that just enough land had been won from Finland to bury the Soviet dead.¹¹⁷ Khrushchev later said of the Winter War in Finland, "A victory at such a cost was actually a moral defeat."¹¹⁸

Stalin's actions during the Finnish war tell us much about him. For instance, Stalin was only too ready to accept Voroshilov's arguments for an attack. This is no doubt because the People's Commissar was only telling Stalin what he wanted to hear.

¹¹⁴ Michael Antonucci, *Thermopylae Every Day*, World War II Magazine (Leesburg: Primedia, April, 2004), 30.

¹¹⁵ Ronald Grigor Suny, *The Soviet Experiment*, 304.

¹¹⁶ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 53.

¹¹⁷ Trotter, *A Frozen Hell*, 263.

¹¹⁸ Antonucci, *Thermopylae Every Day*, 31.

Stalin's desire to demonstrate the Red Army's power to the world was his paramount consideration. In his view this was to be the Soviet equivalent of Germany's rapid conquest of Poland. Given the always present memories of the Allied invasion of the newly born Soviet state in 1918, Stalin wished a quick demonstration of Soviet power to dispel any thoughts by the Western nations of another anti-Soviet adventure. In this sense, we see the Finnish war as a move by the Soviet leader to prevent an even greater conflict, most likely on Soviet soil, later on.

This was a political decision to demonstrate the might of the Red Army. It was a decision Stalin reached on the strategic level- a small war now to prevent a large war later. As Hitler would learn years later with the Wehrmacht mired in the Russian steppes, however, strategic plans require operational feasibility. This is the realm of the military technical specialist. Stalin had no time for questions of logistics or supply, mobility or tactics. Unwilling to listen to the sound advice of Shaposhnikov or Meretskov, Stalin's wishful thinking doomed the adventure and proved the exact opposite of what he had hoped- that the Red Army was an effective and efficient military giant.

Stalin learned from his mistake. As the situation before the Mannerheim Line grew critical, he replaced his political crony Voroshilov with the militarily competent Timoshenko. This illustrates a theme that was to characterize Stalin's command over the Red Army during the Second World War. While at peace he felt it entirely appropriate to place politically reliable nonentities in key Red Army positions, no doubt to ensure the institution's loyalty. Once the fighting had commenced, however, Stalin was willing to put men of real ability in positions of power in the interests of defeating the enemy.

Though publicly Stalin was the ultimate military genius, he knew he was no technical specialist and sought out those who were.

What else is telling about Stalin's behavior in this episode is his subsequent behavior toward Voroshilov. After the failure to achieve a quick victory over Finland, Voroshilov was replaced in command by Timoshenko, and later removed as People's Commissar for Defense. He was not arrested and put on trial, nor was he quietly executed. One would expect after the colossal failure of the Red Army before the Mannerheim Line that Voroshilov would have suffered the fate of Tukhachevsky. If Khrushchev's account of Voroshilov's argument with Stalin is to be believed, the fact that Voroshilov was not arrested seems even more bizarre.

In fact Stalin continued to use Voroshilov throughout the Second World War in various capacities. This illustrates that Stalin, ever the paranoid cynic, perhaps felt a touch of loyalty to some of his officers, or, much more likely, felt he had nothing to fear from them. The arrest and execution of Tukhachevsky may have had a personal dimension to it, the memory of the failure before Warsaw in 1920 still in Stalin's mind. At the end of the day, however, the purge against the Red Army was a political assault on a part of the Soviet experiment which was in the process of moving away from political control. To move against Voroshilov or other supporters of the attack on Finland, was not necessary. Other figures could be written off as scapegoats. Stalin did not admit his mistake in the manner that Lenin did after the Polish debacle in 1920 when he stated, "I absolutely do not pretend in the slightest fashion to knowledge of military science."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁹ Service, *Stalin*, 183.

Finally, the Finnish war illustrates that Stalin was willing to abandon communist orthodoxy when necessary. The creation of a Finnish communist puppet government fit in well with Soviet aspirations of spreading socialism abroad. When the real possibility of Western intervention in the Soviet-Finnish war materialized Stalin was willing to discard his Finnish government in waiting and create a separate peace with Finland. When practical considerations clashed with Soviet ideology, Stalin showed his ability to do what was necessary instead of blindly holding the party line.¹²⁰

The German victory over France and the Low Countries in 1940 gave Stalin much to think about. “Couldn’t they have put up any resistance at all,” said Stalin to Khrushchev, referring to France. “Now he’s going to beat our brains in!” Khrushchev notes that Stalin was severely agitated over the German triumph in the West, cursing the British and French for allowing his ostensible ally such a complete victory.¹²¹

At the same time German panzers were rolling into northwestern France, Meretskov was openly complaining of the command problems at all levels that the Red Army was dealing with. “Our people are afraid to say anything directly, they are afraid to spoil relations and get in uncomfortable situations and are fearful to speak the truth.” Only the month before a special session of the party’s Central Committee together with the Main Military Council, a mixture of political and military figures, was held. Stalin officially replaced Voroshilov with Timoshenko as People’s Commissar of Defense.¹²² Within a month the ranks of general and admiral were reinstated for the first time since

¹²⁰ Roberts, *Stalin’s Wars*, 54.

¹²¹ Simon Berthon and Joanna Potts, *Warlords, An Extraordinary Re-Creation of World War II Through the Eyes and Minds of Hitler, Roosevelt, Churchill and Stalin* (Cambridge: Da Capo Press, 2006), 23-4.

¹²² Overy, *Russia’s War*, 57-8.

the Civil War.¹²³ Also at this time, two months before Hitler's promotion of twelve officers to the rank of Field Marshal, Stalin elevated Timoshenko, Shaposhnikov, and Grigory Kulik to the rank of Marshal of the Soviet Union, returning the number of Marshals to five for the first time since the purge.¹²⁴

By August Timoshenko again abolished the system of dual command, helped to rebuild the officer corps by promoting 1,000 officers to general or admiral, brought back traditional uniforms to build morale and promote command, and rescinded the junior officer right to criticize their immediate commanders. In August Timoshenko promoted Meretskov to the position of Chief of the General Staff.¹²⁵

Stalin's views on proper use of armor changed dramatically at this time. Seeing the effect that Hitler's panzers had made in France, the Soviet leader authorized the return of independent tanks corps and saw to it many new units of this type were commissioned. During this period Stalin approved plans for tank, plane, and gun production that would provide the industrial basis for war production in the years to come.¹²⁶ Konstantin Rokossovsky, an officer arrested and tortured during the purge, was swept up in the wave of promotions to major-general at this time. Not long after he took command of a new mechanized corps.¹²⁷

The disaster in Finland and the victories of Hitler lit a spark under Stalin and the Soviet military/political leadership. These twin shocks to Soviet military complacency ensured change. What had been the operating norm for the Red Army in terms of

¹²³ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 553-4.

¹²⁴ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 17.

¹²⁵ Overy, *Russia's War*, 58.

¹²⁶ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 54-5.

¹²⁷ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 19.

command, operations, tactics, use of armor, and morale were proven to be ineffectual. As stated above, Stalin replaced the top military leadership with proven military specialists. He reconsidered his ideas regarding the employment of armor to better coincide with Germany's proven methods and the trappings of military tradition such as rank and uniforms were allowed to trump notions of Soviet military dogma.

As the Soviet Union enjoyed peace in the mid-1930s Stalin had felt inclined to assert tighter political control over the Red Army. Once that level of political control had proven disastrous to the institution's *raison d'etre*, its operational military function, however, the Soviet leader was willing to compromise and encourage reform. Certainly Stalin went back and forth on these issues. Indeed, the battles between political control and military reform formed a major characteristic of Stalin's wartime leadership and, as we will see, many of these reforms were abandoned after the disaster of June 22, 1941.

It is the very fact that Stalin was flexible rather than dogmatic that allowed for the necessary improvisation once the war began. It was his willingness to listen to his military technical specialists, at least a good deal of the time, and support their institutional calls that set him apart from his eventual adversary, Hitler. Certainly Hitler backed his military innovators before the war, and would yield the occasional point to his generals. As we shall see, however, once the war between Germany and the Soviet Union began it was Hitler's rigidity and the absolute belief in his superior judgment, particularly after 1943, that led to the downfall of the Third Reich. While Stalin demanded the same level of authority that Hitler did, the Soviet leader was at least willing to admit that his generals could know something that he did not.

CHAPTER 4

BARBAROSSA

Barbarossa, A Preemptive War?

On June 22, 1941, as German panzers began rolling into the Soviet Union, Adolf Hitler issued a proclamation to the German people that accused the Soviets of, among other things, violating German airspace and building up a massive army along the common border.¹²⁸ The inference was that this massive Red Army force had been placing itself in a position to strike at the Third Reich in the near future.

Beginning in the early 1990s, the idea that Hitler had attacked the Soviet Union as a defensive measure against an impending Soviet invasion had gained credence among some historians. Historians such as Viktor Suvorov, Heinz Magenheimer, Constantine Pleshakov and others fall firmly into this camp.¹²⁹ The acceptance of this view casts Stalin in the role of aggressor in 1941 and, while not exculpating Hitler from blame for his brutal methods and savage war in the Soviet Union, at least partially presents him as a

¹²⁸ Max Domarus, *Hitler: Speeches and Proclamations, 1932-1945, The Chronicle of a Dictatorship, Volume IV* (Wauconda: Bolchazy-Carducci Publishers, 2004), 2444-51.

¹²⁹ Viktor Suvorov, *Icebreaker: Who Started the Second World War?* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1990); Heinz Magenheimer, *Hitler's War: Key Strategic Decisions, 1940-1945* (London: Orion, 2002); Constantine Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly: The Tragic First Ten Days of World War II on the Eastern Front* (New York: Mariner Books, 2005)

victim. At any rate this position has the potential to alter our perceptions of both men and their strategic views of the war.

The theory of Barbarossa as a preemptive war is essentially brought down to three arguments. The first deals with the offensive rhetoric of Stalin and the offensive-oriented operational doctrines of the Red Army in the years leading up to 1941. The second concerns the offensive posture of Red Army units toward Germany in the year leading up to Barbarossa. Finally, there existed Soviet war plans for an attack upon Germany.

These three factors, though offering circumstantial evidence, do not prove that Stalin was preparing a major offensive against Germany. Rather each of these factors can be explained within the context of the traditional view of Barbarossa as Hitler's ultimate gamble to win decisively the Second World War.

Stalin and the Red Army leadership did indeed see the Soviet military as primarily an offensive force. After the purges Soviet military doctrine elevated the operational art of the offensive. Plans and training for defense, long a major factor in Soviet war preparations, were downplayed, as were preparations for partisan warfare in the event of a Western invasion. As Catherine Merridale wrote, "The notion that the enemy would be repelled and beaten on his own soil was not just a romantic dream; from the late 1930s it was the centerpiece of Stalinist military planning."¹³⁰

Stalin liked offensive-minded officers. Dimitry Pavlov, who would later be shot for his failure to hold Minsk while commanding the Western Military District in 1941, was one such officer who was often heard telling his subordinates to "Think

¹³⁰ Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 27-8.

offensive.”¹³¹ Stalin himself stated in 1940 that a modern army with armor, heavy artillery, and planes must be an offensive army. At the end of that year Timoshenko offered a speech to the Red Army High Command in which he offered his views on Soviet military strategy. His statements primarily dealt with problems of offense though he did note the failure of Poland and France to defend against modern weapons. He noted that a modern defense needed to be one of depth, with many operational areas. He was clear to state, however, that wars were not won through defense and attack was always preferable.¹³²

The Soviet offensive mindset was not limited to operations and tactics. Even tank design bore a peculiar hallmark of this Soviet cult of the attack. The gas pedals of the famous T-34 main battle tank operated in reverse of the standard. Once in gear the driver would press down the pedal to remain stopped, then let up gently to increase speed. This possibly explains the high number of T-34s involved in collisions with other tanks during the war. At any rate a killed or wounded driver ensured an acceleration of the tank rather than a stop.¹³³

The Red Army was indeed operationally offensive oriented. This is very different, however, from being strategically offensive oriented and actively seeking a war. If and when war came to the USSR, Stalin expected to hurl the Red Army at the enemy and push them back onto its soil before annihilating it. All things being equal this makes sense. As Timoshenko noted defense does not win wars. The very word ‘offense’ has a positive connotation, while ‘defense’ is negative. If Stalin wished to build

¹³¹ Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly*, 99.

¹³² Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 53, 71.

¹³³ Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 132.

an army of winners, they must be attackers, not defenders. The propaganda use of these terms was very important, both for instilling the Red Army and citizens of the Soviet Union with a sense of security and confidence, and in dissuading foreign powers from aggressive intentions toward the USSR.

The Soviet obsession with offense at this time is not so different from the French Army's spirit and doctrine of *élan* before 1914.¹³⁴ The Red Army expected that sudden, immediate attacks at the outbreak of hostilities would ensure victory just as the French did. Though many in the French military and government prior to World War One were no doubt eager for a settling of accounts with Germany, it was not the active policy of France to seek a war. Both the French before 1914 and the Soviets before 1941 maintained operationally offensive minded militaries, while on the strategic level their governments sought a continuation of the peace, at least for the foreseeable future. Essentially, Stalin favored a strategic defense even as his generals favored a military offensive. These two concepts were at odds and helped to contribute to the disaster of June, 1941.¹³⁵

The second argument for the preemptive war theory, that of the Red Army's offensive military posture toward Germany before Barbarossa, can be largely attributed to Stalin's unwise desire to defend the Soviet Union at its borders instead of taking the advice of his officers and prepare for a defense in depth.

By the summer of 1940, perhaps prompted by fears of the relatively easy Nazi success in Western Europe, Stalin ordered that the bulk of the frontier defense be moved

¹³⁴ Ibid., 44.

¹³⁵ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 71.

up to the new border with Germany, abandoning the Stalin Line along the old border with Poland. Not heeding Timoshenko's call for a defense in depth, Stalin also rejected the advice of another rising star in the Red Army constellation, Georgy Zhukov.¹³⁶ Even Shaposhnikov, the military specialist who had warned Stalin of the dangers before the invasion of Finland, could not persuade the Soviet leader to defend East Poland and the Baltic States with only a token force while the bulk of the Red Army remained further east.¹³⁷

Stalin's movement of troops into the newly acquired Soviet territories was indeed a political decision perhaps intended to give Hitler pause. Even as both dictators enjoyed the fruits of the nonaggression pact, they also viewed an eventual military showdown between them as a certainty.¹³⁸ Stalin, however, was playing for time and hoped to dispel any illusions that Germany and the West might have that an invasion of the Soviet Union would be a walkover. Even as his overall strategic and diplomatic policies called for peace, Stalin wanted foreign nations to know that the Soviet Union was prepared for war. Tens of thousands of Red Army troops visible across the border from Germany was a major calculation in Stalin's desire to maintain the peace for as long as he could. For this, he was willing to sacrifice defense in depth.

The third preemptive war argument deals with the existence of Soviet war plans for the invasion of Germany. Constantine Pleshakov, whose work regarding the beginning of the war on the Eastern Front is otherwise very good, notes that there is no "smoking gun" or definitive proof that ties Stalin conclusively to an imminent attack on

¹³⁶ Overy, *Russia's War*, 65.

¹³⁷ Oleg Rzheshesky, *Shaposhnikov (From Stalin's Generals)*, 229.

¹³⁸ Overy, *The Dictators*, 441.

Germany. No documents or testimony that this was Stalin's plan exist. However, Pleshakov cites the war plans prepared between August 1940 and May 1941 as proof that Stalin was preparing for an invasion of Germany by the summer of 1942.¹³⁹

Did France's Plan 17, the pre-1914 war plan for an attack on Germany, constitute a strategy of French aggression? Did Germany's Schlieffen Plan? Or were these rather part of preparations for the possibility of war? The idea that a nation preparing war plans against a potential rival necessarily intends a war is ludicrous. In the 1930s the United States drew up a war plan in the event of conflict with the British Empire in which an invasion of Canada played a central role.¹⁴⁰ How many war plans does the United States now possess in the event of war?

Marxist ideology demanded that communist states spread the revolution to other nations through any means possible. Given this it seems probable that Stalin would have attacked Germany had the possibility of victory appeared likely. However, with the strength of Nazi Germany after the fall of France Stalin would not have risked the complete collapse of the Soviet empire, particularly after the Red Army's dismal performance in Finland.¹⁴¹

The point is that war plans alone do not imply aggressive intent. Rather, they simply are a part of contingency planning which is an important and perhaps even critical aspect of modern military efficiency and national defense.

Between the Soviet rhetoric and operational doctrines favoring the offensive, the provocative military posture of the Red Army in 1940-1, and the existence of war plans

¹³⁹ Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly*, 13.

¹⁴⁰ Peter Carlson, *Raiding the Icebox* (Washington Post, December 30, 2005), C01.

¹⁴¹ Service, *Stalin*, 408.

directing an attack upon Germany, it is easy to leap to conclusions. The fact remains that each of these arguments for Stalin's aggressive intent are baseless when one considers the other factors in Soviet military planning and Stalin's diplomatic strategy.

In a postwar letter to General Gyer von Scheppenburg, German diplomat Gustav Hilger considered the idea of Stalin launching a war of aggression against Germany. He noted private wartime conversations in which he asked three captured Red Army generals if Stalin had any plans to break the nonaggression pact by a military invasion westward. All of the generals said that a Soviet attack against Germany in 1941 was out of the question. However, they were divided on their views as to whether Stalin intended to attack at a later date.¹⁴² Certainly Hilger had nothing to gain by painting his former master Hitler as the aggressor. This letter adds one more layer of evidence in disproving the preemptive war theory.

Preparations

For Hitler and Stalin the idea of war between their two nations was only a matter of time. The reason for their mutual expectation of a conflict lay at least partially in their ideologies. Hitler's passionate hatred of communism and his desire to see Germany gain territory in the east at Russia's expense made war certain. Stalin, seeing in the Western nations the aggressive process of capitalist imperialism, viewed an attack on the Soviet Union as inevitable. Therefore their roles in the beginning of the 1941-5 conflict were

¹⁴² Gustav Hilger, letter to Gyer von Scheppenburg (Munich: Institut für Zeitgeschichte Archiv, October 10, 1958)

already written in their fundamental beliefs. Germany would be the attacker; the Soviet Union would be the defender.¹⁴³

At the end of July, 1940, barely weeks after the fall of France, Hitler announced to his generals his intention to invade the Soviet Union,

Russia is the factor on which Britain is relying the most. Something must have happened in London. The British were completely down; now they have perked up again. With Russia smashed, Britain's last hope would be shattered. The sooner Russia is crushed the better. If we start in May, 1941, we would have five months to finish the job.¹⁴⁴

When Jodl informed his subordinates at OKW of Hitler's intention to attack the Soviet Union, many expressed concern at the prospect of a two front war and an hour long argument ensued. Jodl related Hitler's arguments, including his belief that war with the Soviet Union would come sooner or later and Germany was at that time in the superior position. Hitler has also stated that conquering the Soviet Union would be easy compared to the battle over France.¹⁴⁵

The catalyst for Hitler's decision to attack the Soviet Union was the hope of defeating Britain and ending the war. This desire meshed well with his fervent anti-communism and quest for German *lebensraum*. Guderian writes in his memoirs that Hitler had sounded him out on an attack upon the Soviet Union as early as October, 1939.¹⁴⁶ The nonaggression pact for Hitler was an expedient way to ensure Soviet neutrality during the German war against Poland. When Britain and France failed to make peace, Hitler saw the value in a continuing relationship with the Soviet Union.

¹⁴³ Overy, *The Dictators*, 441-3.

¹⁴⁴ Berthon, *The Warlords*, 31.

¹⁴⁵ Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, 67-8.

¹⁴⁶ Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 84-5.

Hitler's decision to invade Russia was based on his traditional anti-Soviet views as well as his belief that knocking the Soviet Union out of the war would also force Britain to surrender. Here, Hitler's strategic view coincided with his ideology.

By the end of 1940 many of Hitler's generals were convinced that Britain would be the target of a major military operation the following spring. Guderian proposed a logistically impossible scheme to send a massive army to North Africa in accordance with a larger Mediterranean strategy.¹⁴⁷ Hitler's eyes were firmly fixed on Russia, however, and in a November war game in Berlin the German Army beat the Red Army in a quick, decisive campaign.¹⁴⁸ On December 18 Hitler issued Directive No. 23, ordering the invasion of the Soviet Union for the following May.¹⁴⁹

The initial planning for Operation Barbarossa, the invasion of the Soviet Union, was made by OKH.¹⁵⁰ In a postwar conversation with B. H. Liddel Hart, General Blumentritt stated that Brauchitsch, Halder, and Rundstedt had opposed the invasion, citing their experiences in the First World War. Supply, movement, and reinforcement problems were major concerns for these officers.¹⁵¹ Nevertheless the leaders of OKH set aside their initial hesitation and diligently worked to create an operational plan to topple Soviet Russia. Halder himself came to believe that Russia would be conquered within eight to ten weeks.¹⁵²

¹⁴⁷ Hart, *Guderian*, 66.

¹⁴⁸ Overy, *The Dictators*, 525.

¹⁴⁹ Berthon, *Warlords*, 48-9.

¹⁵⁰ Bond, *Brauchitsch (From Hitler's Generals)*, 86.

¹⁵¹ Hart, *The German Generals Talk*, 172.

¹⁵² Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 142.

While Hitler was considering war with the Soviet Union as both inevitable and the best way to defeat Britain, many of his military leaders did not necessarily agree. Both Brauchitsch and Halder believed it was better to keep Russia friendly while the war against Britain continued. Despite their own preferences, however, they did not oppose or even openly question Hitler's plan. By and large the leadership of the German Army shared Hitler's aversion to communism and was only too ready to justify an attack upon the Soviet Union. They no doubt shared Hitler's underestimation of the Red Army as well.¹⁵³ Hitler began to intervene in operational planning. He was not trained for this nor had any real aptitude beyond that of an enthusiastic amateur.¹⁵⁴ He had offered occasional bursts of insight into operational thinking, such as the suggestion to take the Belgian fortress of Eben Emael and nearby bridges by means of glider troops,¹⁵⁵ but this reflected simply an inspired idea, not a thought out and detailed piece of war planning. Hitler's decision to invade the Soviet Union was born from a fusion of ideology and a strategic vision for ending the war. Sharing many of his ideological convictions, and believing in their own power to improvise, the generals agreed to the opening of a two-front war. By this time, however, the generals were thoroughly cowed and, after the stunning victory over France, not about to object.

Hitler spoke with over two hundred officers in March, 1941, to let them know of his intention to attack the Soviet Union. In this speech Hitler noted that the war with Russia was to be entirely different from that conducted in the West. He emphasized the

¹⁵³ Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, 68-70.

¹⁵⁴ Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 344.

¹⁵⁵ Len Deighton, *Blitzkrieg, From the Rise of Hitler to the Fall of Dunkirk* (Edison: Castle Books, 1979), 201.

racial and ideological dimensions. He called for a war without mercy or pity, a war of annihilation. Soviet Commissars and agents of Red Army military intelligence were to be shot outright. He demanded that his officers set aside any personal distaste for such ruthlessness. "Harshness today means lenience in the future," he told them.¹⁵⁶

The army itself was completely complicit in planning for this war of annihilation. On the eve of 'Operation Barbarossa' the army issued its official policy for soldiers in the upcoming campaign entitled 'Guidelines for the Conduct of the Troops in Russia.' A portion of it stated,

This struggle requires ruthless and energetic action against Bolshevik agitators, guerrillas, saboteurs and Jews, and the total elimination of all active or passive resistance. The members of the Red Army- including prisoners- must be treated with extreme reserve and the greatest caution since one must reckon with devious methods of combat. The asiatic soldiers of the Red Army in particular are devious, cunning and without feeling.¹⁵⁷

With Hitler's apocalyptic vision the generals of the German Army went quietly along. Instead of speaking out against the prospect of such monstrous barbarity and methods that would have made their military predecessors cringe, they by and large prepared for the nightmare war by reading up on Caulaincourt's *Memoirs*.¹⁵⁸ How many would have stood in open revolt had they known then that the Wehrmacht would have no better luck than Napoleon's Army over a century earlier?

¹⁵⁶ Ibid., 355-6.

¹⁵⁷ Michael Burleigh, *The Third Reich, A New History* (New York: Hill and Wang, 2000), 521.

¹⁵⁸ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 136.

Stalin too predicted war in the future between Germany and the Soviet Union. After the fall of France Stalin expressed his fears that Hitler was going to turn on the Soviet Union.¹⁵⁹ In December of 1940 he told his generals,

We know that Hitler is intoxicated by his victories and believes that the Red Army will need at least four years to prepare for war. Obviously, four years would be more than enough for us. But, we must be ready much earlier. We will try to delay the war for another two years.¹⁶⁰

Even as late as May, 1941 Stalin was stating his belief in a future war between Germany and the Soviet Union. In an address to Red Army Academy graduates he said, “We must prepare for war. The enemy will be Germany.”¹⁶¹

As stated above, Stalin’s prediction of war between the two European powers was based upon communist ideology. The nations of Western Europe including Germany, the United States, and Japan were viewed as simply different colors of the same imperialist rainbow. Within communist dogma, war was an essential feature of capitalist imperialism. The very nature of the competition for new markets through violence would eventually bring the war to the Soviet Union.¹⁶²

For the Soviets, the idea of foreign invaders attempting to overthrow the communist regime was not merely a possibility. It was history. The 1918 military intervention of the United States, Britain, Japan, and others left a profound mark upon Russian thinking that still exists to this day. Perhaps the greatest propaganda tool Soviet communism ever received was from this Western military adventure. Soviet leaders could always point back to 1918 and state with a measure of truth that the imperialists

¹⁵⁹ John Erickson, *Moskalenko* (From *Stalin's Generals*), 140.

¹⁶⁰ Berthon, *The Warlords*, 47.

¹⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 70.

¹⁶² Overy, *The Dictators*, 441-4.

had tried to take over Russia and that they were waiting for another opportunity to do so. In Stalin's eyes the war between Britain and Germany was simply an imperialist civil war, a capitalist housecleaning before the great showdown with socialism.

For Stalin, however, the war with the West was not imminent, but was always a few years off. Nevertheless Stalin prepared his nation, the Red Army, and his generals for the coming conflict that would decide the course of human history. The failure in Finland and Hitler's lightning victory in the West convinced Stalin of the necessity of the military technical specialist for these preparations. Georgy Zhukov was one such specialist.

Zhukov has been compared to U. S. Grant as a general who fully understood the horror of modern warfare and psychologically was prepared for it.¹⁶³ During the summer of 1939 the Red Army had been actively engaged in a shooting war with the Imperial Japanese Army. With Zhukov in command, the Red Army enjoyed significant advantages in infantry, machine guns, artillery, planes, and tanks- the very muscles of a modern fighting force.¹⁶⁴ For all of the Red Army's numerical superiority, Zhukov still presented himself as a master tactician as he employed over 60,000 soldiers and 500 tanks in a classic encirclement battle. This engagement foreshadowed the massive battles that would be the hallmark of the Russian front from 1941 to 1945. The Soviets lost around 23,000 men, while Japanese casualties were almost three times as high.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶³ David M. Glantz, *Stumbling Colossus, The Red Army on the Eve of World War* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1998), 43.

¹⁶⁴ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 522.

¹⁶⁵ Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 39.

Zhukov's success in the Far East had profound implications for both the general and the Red Army as a whole. The Red Army victory over the Japanese no doubt emboldened Stalin's decision to embark on the Finnish adventure in December. It also ensured a place for Zhukov on Stalin's radar just at a time when the Soviet leader began to look for men of real military talent. The fact that Zhukov had not been tainted by the embarrassing setbacks in Finland also added to his prestige.

Like the Germans a month before, the Soviet General Staff conducted a war game based on the premise of a German-Soviet war in December, 1940. In both scenarios the Germans came out the victor. While the German game revealed a short, sharp war in which the Soviet Union fell as easily as France had, however, the Soviet game revealed the fall of Russia only after initial Red Army gains, followed by devastation at the hands of the Wehrmacht. During this game Dmitry Pavlov, a Soviet armor specialist and later victim of the NKVD following the German invasion, played the part of the Red Army while the role of the German Army was played by Zhukov. The results were so unsettling that Zhukov hesitated to tell Stalin the truth.¹⁶⁶

Fearing his generals were sugarcoating the results of the war game Stalin demanded to know how the actual game played out. In a meeting with the military leadership Stalin insisted on the truth and questioned the findings that man for man a Soviet division was the equal of its German counterpart,

Perhaps the *Ustav* (regulations) do state with a certain propagandistic emphasis that one of our divisions in a meeting engagement can deal with one division of the German-Fascist forces, and that in the offensive one and a half divisions can break through the defense of one of their

¹⁶⁶ Overy, *The Dictators*, 525.

divisions, but among this group of people assembled here; within the circle of present Front and army commanders we have got to discuss practical possibilities.¹⁶⁷

Stalin's insistence on hearing the truth and not allowing himself or his generals into buying a safer and more convenient fiction tells much about his military views at this time. Before the Finnish adventure Stalin was content to believe that the Red Army was a first-rate fighting machine, if not the equal of Hitler's army, then certainly not far behind. By early 1941, however, Stalin was no longer willing to risk the security of the Soviet state over matters of military preparedness. Propaganda had its place, to be sure, but not in the context of military planning.

Rather than punishing Zhukov for his success as the German commander in the game, Stalin promoted him to Chief of the General Staff of the Red Army. In this post he replaced Meretskov, who had been a voice of reason during the war with Finland. Meretskov had been promoted General of the Army and placed over the General Staff by Timoshenko in the military reforms of the previous year as recognition for his outspokenness before the Finnish war.¹⁶⁸ Zhukov, who had no General Staff experience requested to remain a field commander. Stalin increasingly valued the victor of the Far East and, despite the general's wishes, believed that his talents were needed in Moscow.¹⁶⁹

Though at this time Stalin increasingly looked for merit over political toadying, he nevertheless maintained a climate of fear over his generals. Shortly after his promotion to Chief of the General Staff, Zhukov was ordered by Timoshenko to meet

¹⁶⁷ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 51.

¹⁶⁸ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 52-3.

¹⁶⁹ Overy, *Russia's War*, 67.

with Stalin. When Zhukov asked what he and Stalin were to discuss Timoshenko replied, “Everything. But remember he won’t listen to long reports. What it takes you several hours to tell me, you’ll have to tell him in ten minutes.”¹⁷⁰ Zhukov later recalled that in 1941 he feared Stalin and his secret police chief, Lavrentiy Beria, but he still believed in the Soviet leader,

You have to consider exactly what it meant at that time to go against Stalin. We could all remember 1937 and 1938. To have said that he was wrong would have meant that, even before you got out of the building, you would land up in Beria’s hands, and Beria was almost always present during my meeting with Stalin... And yet that is only one aspect of the truth. I’ll tell you another. I didn’t regard myself as cleverer or more far-sighted as Stalin, or that I had a better understanding of the situation than he had. Like everyone else, I had enormous faith in him, in his ability to find a way out of the most difficult situations. I sensed the danger of a German attack, the feeling was gnawing at my vitals. But my faith in Stalin, and my belief that in the end everything would come out the way he suggested, was stronger.¹⁷¹

During an early 1941 meeting with his military leaders Stalin raged against the high casualties of the Air Force from training maneuvers. The thirty year old Lieutenant General Pavel Rychagov, the head of the Air Force, passionately defended the pilots and exploded at Stalin. “Of course we will continue to have many accidents,” Rychagov said, “as long as you keep making flying coffins.” Stalin let the heated statement hang in the air for a few moments before responding grimly, “You should not have said that.” Soon after the incident Rychagov was arrested. He was shot in October.¹⁷²

¹⁷⁰ G. K. Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov* (New York: Delacorte Press, 1971), 207.

¹⁷¹ Viktor Anfilov, *Zhukov (From Stalin’s Generals)*, 247-8.

¹⁷² David E. Murphy, *What Stalin Knew, The Enigma of Barbarossa* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), 194.

Throughout May other figures in the Red Army Air Force were arrested. Many of them were accused of conspiracies against the Soviet Union and sabotage of defense production.¹⁷³ This was another flare up of the great military purges that began in 1937 with the arrest of Tukhachevsky and never completely ended. This is in marked contrast to Hitler's approach to his military leadership at the same time. While the threat of Gestapo action hung over the German generals, none were actually arrested or shot. Rather, Hitler co-opted his military leadership by bribery. Stalin clung to fear as his primary weapon over his generals. The political and ideological inspiration that both dictators offered their armies was a key factor in their military relationships, but it certainly was not the only one. Hitler bribed his generals because the German Army remained in many respects an independent institution to which Nazism was allied. Stalin dominated his generals through threats of violence and murder because the Red Army was a creation and tool of the Communist Party, which he ruled.

Roughly six weeks before the German attack Stalin took a major step on his road to becoming the Soviet Union's supreme warlord. On May 5th Stalin decided to take on the position of Chairman of the Council of People's Commissars, the post that Lenin had held after the October Revolution and essentially the post of Prime Minister. This was his first position in the Soviet government after holding only the post of General Secretary of the Communist Party since 1922, a position he retained. With an eye on the situation developing abroad as well as the desire to better harmonize party and state

¹⁷³ Ibid., 198-202.

organizations, Stalin believed that his time to take an active and public role in the Soviet government had come.¹⁷⁴

Stalin's domination of the Red Army was now *de jure* as well as *de facto*. As head of the People's Commissars, Stalin now sat directly above the People's Commissar for Defense, Timoshenko, who in turn commanded the primary agencies of the Soviet Military including the General Staff under Zhukov.

It was Stalin's conviction that war with Germany was inevitable. Despite this he did not believe that the war was imminent in early 1941. Stalin desired the peace between the Soviet Union and Germany to continue for as long as possible to give the Red Army time to prepare. However, Stalin's hope for continued peace while at the same time he attempted to prepare the Red Army for war led to mixed signals for the military leadership, and was a principle factor in the disaster in June.¹⁷⁵ The paradox between Stalin's diplomatic strategy of peace and his operationally offensive military is evident in his speech to military academy graduates in May, 1941,

A good defense signifies the need to attack. Attack is the best form of defense.... We must now conduct a peaceful, defensive policy with attack. Yes, defense with attack. We must now re-teach our army and our commanders. Educate them in the spirit of attack.¹⁷⁶

The Soviet defense system grouped Red Army units into five geographical areas, or military districts, bordering Europe. These were Leningrad, Baltic, Western, Kiev, and Odessa. The Baltic, Western, and Kiev were considered special military districts as they were capable of operations without general mobilization or reserves for a short time. The

¹⁷⁴ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 63-4.

¹⁷⁵ Glantz, *When Titan's Clashed*, 26.

¹⁷⁶ Service, *Stalin*, 407.

other districts were essentially military administration units with limited forces.¹⁷⁷ As a precautionary measure in May-June, Stalin allowed 800,000 reservists to be put on the active list as well as twenty-eight divisions sent to the military districts in the west. The military districts were ordered to build new forward command posts and 40,000 troops were sent to man them.¹⁷⁸

Yet Stalin insisted that the Red Army do nothing to provoke Germany in the weeks leading up to June 22. The Germans made moves that the military leadership interpreted as hostile and most likely the prelude to an attack though Stalin refused to believe that war was at his doorstep. In line with his attempts at diplomatic solidarity with Germany, Stalin halted the Soviet recognition of Allied governments-in-exile and extended recognition to the new pro-German government in Iraq. These moves, in concert with his military movements into the western military districts, were intended to both bribe and threaten Germany into a continued peace.¹⁷⁹ For all that Stalin's desire for peace was at odds with his generals' fear of an impending attack.

By mid-June German aircraft made no less than ten reconnaissance flights over Soviet territory every day. Timoshenko and Zhukov believed that this was strong evidence of an impending German attack. When the two generals brought this to Stalin's attention he said simply, "Let's talk about this later." When the generals later pressed the point Stalin exploded, telling them that putting the Red Army on alert would provoke the Germans. Earlier in the month Stalin had acquiesced to a German request to search for German soldiers fallen during World War One on Soviet territory. The Soviet leader

¹⁷⁷ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 69.

¹⁷⁸ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 69.

¹⁷⁹ Ibid., 64.

ignored Timoshenko and Zhukov's objections that this was just an intelligence gathering mission.¹⁸⁰

The June 14 issue of the Soviet newspaper *Izvestiya*, mouthpiece of official policy, stated with certainty that Germany had no intention of breaking the non-aggression pact. It blamed that current state of tension over the subject on lies and rumors.¹⁸¹ On June 18, only four days before the German invasion, Zhukov again tried to impress upon Stalin the facts. Growing angry at what he insisted was his generals' desire to start a war, Stalin dressed him down sharply in front of the politburo,

Have you come to scare us with war, or do you want a war because you don't have enough medals? If you're going to provoke the Germans on the frontier by moving troops there without my permission, then heads will roll, mark my words.¹⁸²

Stalin also ignored the voice of Marshal Shaposhnikov. Shaposhnikov who had argued against the attack on Finland, later demanded that most senior officers attend intense courses on the failures of that adventure.¹⁸³ By 1941 he still clung to the idea that the main body of the Red Army should stand at the original border between the Soviet Union and Poland, not the new border hundreds of miles to the west with Germany.¹⁸⁴

Despite the warnings of his generals, as well as those of his intelligence services and border guards, Stalin failed to adequately prepare for the German attack. Recently discovered letters from Hitler to Stalin in the weeks leading up to Barbarossa seem to explain some aspects of Stalin's behavior during this period. These letters, which have

¹⁸⁰ Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly*, 2, 7.

¹⁸¹ Erickson, *The Soviet High Command*, 563.

¹⁸² John Lukacs, *June, 1941, Hitler and Stalin* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 80.

¹⁸³ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 20.

¹⁸⁴ Overy, *Russia's War*, 65.

received critical attention but have not been completely authenticated, contain an entreaty from Hitler to the Soviet leader, asking him not give his generals in Poland any excuse to launch their own attack against the Soviet Union independent of Nazi policy.¹⁸⁵

Whether or not these letters are genuine, one thing is clear. In early 1941 Stalin's strategic desire to maintain the peace clashed with the operational military insight of his generals, to say nothing of the alarms bells from other sources. The future warlord refused to see the war coming. Zhukov later said,

It appeared to us before the war that Stalin knew no less and even more than we did about matters of war and defense and had a deeper understanding and foresight. When we had to encounter difficulties in the war, however, we understood that our views about Stalin had been erroneous.¹⁸⁶

The very essence of Stalin's rule over the Soviet Union, his elevation to an almost God-like figure, ensured that even his generals were powerless to take appropriate military action in light of an obvious threat. This impotence among Stalin's military specialists, along with his own wishful thinking and failure to see the obvious, nearly led to the total destruction of the Soviet Union.

Stalin Becomes Warlord

The shock of the German invasion of the Soviet Union on June 22, 1941 brought radical change to Stalin's command relationship with his military leaders. With the assumption of the Chairmanship of the People's Commissars six weeks earlier Stalin held his first government post. Over the course of the next two months Stalin consolidated his

¹⁸⁵ Murphy, *What Stalin Knew*, 256-8.

¹⁸⁶ Edwin P. Hoyt, *Stalin's War, Tragedy and Triumph, 1941-1945* (New York: Cooper Square Press, 2003), 30.

de jure hold over the military and assumed ever greater government responsibilities. The German invasion represented the greatest crisis the Soviet Union had faced in its twenty-four year existence and Stalin's rapid accumulation of posts shortly after sprang from his desire to control the war effort. No longer was the Soviet leader content to dominate the Red Army through a combination of inspiration and terror. With the Wehrmacht rapidly driving east Stalin inserted himself firmly at the top of the chain of command.

During the reforms of 1938 a Main Military Soviet had been established to provide a combination of military and political leadership for the Red Army. In theory the Main Military Soviet was to take command during wartime but this did not prove to be the case in 1939 or 1941. As a council it lacked the decisive leadership that an army at war requires and so the Commissar for Defense remained the primary military commander for the Red Army. The Commissar for Defense's role was political as well as military, however. The one critical position that failed to materialize after the purges or the Finnish war was that of Commander-in-Chief of the Red Army.¹⁸⁷

While it is possible that the post of Commander-in-Chief failed to appear because of simple oversight by the Soviets, it is likely that Stalin, jealous of power and fearing the emergence of another Tukhachevsky, refused to allow it. Such a position would have ensured a rapid, though perhaps flawed, response to the German attack. Perhaps a Red Army Commander-in-Chief like Shaposhnikov would have had sufficient power to deploy the bulk of the Soviet defense in depth, thus robbing the Wehrmacht of many of its early victories. At any rate Stalin himself soon filled the void of supreme command.

¹⁸⁷ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 136; Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 27.

In late June the State Defense Committee (GKO) was formed with Stalin as chairman. The GKO's task was to oversee the general and political aspects of the war, and essentially acted as the highest level of Soviet government during the war.¹⁸⁸ Stalin's primary tool for exercising command was the Stavka, or supreme headquarters, which was created on June 23 and reorganized with wide responsibilities a few weeks later. It was through the Stavka that Stalin issued orders, received reports, and carried out the major strategic decisions of the war. Members of the Stavka included the cream of the Soviet military and political crop; Voroshilov, Timoshenko, Molotov, Zhukov, the cavalryman and Stalin crony Budenny, Admiral Kuznetsov and Stalin himself. Many held seats on both the GKO and Stavka simultaneously. On July 10 Stalin was elevated to the post of Supreme Commander of the Armed Forces and on July 19 he replaced Timoshenko as People's Commissar for Defense.¹⁸⁹

The makeup of the Stavka is interesting. Primarily a strategic military council, it nevertheless included figures like Voroshilov and Budenny, who despite being Marshals had never proven themselves as military specialists. Indeed, they owed their rise and rank to their special relationship with Stalin and their Communist Party credentials. With Stalin and Molotov on the Stavka as well, the three men who actually were military technicians, Timoshenko, Zhukov, and Admiral Kuznetsov, were outnumbered. With the full input of Stalin's cronies in military matters the Stavka began its life with a decidedly political tilt.¹⁹⁰

¹⁸⁸ Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler*, 488.

¹⁸⁹ David M. Glantz, *Colossus Reborn*, 369; Overy, *Russia's War*, 77; 371-2.

¹⁹⁰ Service, *Stalin*, 413.

Stalin's assumption of the post of Defense Commissar while he maintained his position of head of government was not unique. Both Hitler and Winston Churchill served in the position of war minister even as they remained chancellor and prime minister. The dual posts undoubtedly allowed the leaders to better coordinate political and military policies. However, while Churchill's military authority ended with these two posts both Stalin and Hitler grasped further for more direct military authority.

The sudden reorganization of the military command structure was a departure from Stalin's former mode of rule. Previously Stalin had preferred to exercise command indirectly, hence his remaining only the General Secretary of the party for so many years as opposed to the visible and active post of Chairman of the People's Commissars. The emergency forced Stalin to drop his humble façade and adopt the active responsibility for leadership of the Soviet Union.¹⁹¹ Nor did Stalin merely accept one leadership role in the new wartime system, but many. Historian John Erickson called Stalin's accumulation of power at this time a "withering blast of super-centralization."¹⁹²

Three Military Directions were set up, under the General Staff, to command the various front commanders. Stalin routinely bypassed both the General Staff and the Military Directions and within a year the Military Directions were removed from the chain of command. The idea of Soviet Military or Strategic Directions appeared again, however, several decades later after nuclear weapons became an integral part of the Soviet Union's defense establishment.¹⁹³ Chaos resulted from the surprise and shock to

¹⁹¹ Overy, *Russia's War*, 77.

¹⁹² John Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 139.

¹⁹³ Chris Bellamy, *Absolute War, Soviet Russia in the Second World War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2007), 235.

all levels of command in the wake of the German invasion. Inexperienced officers who had been promoted following the purges and a shortage of trained staff officers added to the Red Army's breakdown in the face of Hitler's troops. With the enemy advancing and the Red Army in a state of paralyzed confusion, Stalin called for greater party control over the military.¹⁹⁴

Political commissars were once again in fashion. On July 16 the on-again-off-again practice of dual command returned, representing a powerful party intrusion into military affairs.¹⁹⁵ An even greater intrusion into the Red Army's functions was Stalin's use of Stavka representatives. These representatives, often high ranking generals or senior political figures, were sent to bolster determination among the local commanders and act as Red Army fire brigades, moving from one hot spot to another. Additionally, these representatives ensured that operations were carried out in line with Stavka's strategy.¹⁹⁶ It was not uncommon for the Chief of the General Staff to be sent to the front as a representative. Zhukov later estimated that he and General Aleksandr Vasilevsky, a later chief of the General Staff, had been sent as representatives 15 times each.¹⁹⁷

Indeed, within the first few days of the crisis Timoshenko and Zhukov, Stalin's top military men, were sent on errands all over the front to stiffen morale and do what they could to salvage the situation. Soon Timoshenko took over the Western Front from General Dmitry Pavlov while Zhukov was brought back to Moscow to concentrate on

¹⁹⁴ Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 62-4.

¹⁹⁵ Overy, *Russia's War*, 80.

¹⁹⁶ David M. Glantz & Jonathan M. House, *The Battle of Kursk* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1999), 27.

¹⁹⁷ Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East, The Nazi-Soviet War, 1941-1945* (London: Hodder Arnold, 2005), 209.

overall strategy.¹⁹⁸ The two other military Fronts that were hastily organized at this time, the North-Western and the South-Western, were taken over by Voroshilov and Budenny, again stressing Stalin's insistence at the outset of political reliability in his commanders at the expense of military ability.¹⁹⁹

With Minsk threatened by the Nazi advance Marshal Shaposhnikov was dispatched to meet with the commander of the Western Military District, General Pavlov. After Shaposhnikov returned to Moscow Pavlov was visited by Marshal Grigory Kulik and then Marshal Voroshilov. In the middle of the crisis Pavlov had to deal with Stalin's envoys and their demands for regular reports even as he labored to halt the Germans.²⁰⁰

Pavlov, who had been one of Stalin's favorites before the war for his military aggressiveness, had been completely under the Soviet leader's spell in the weeks leading up to the German invasion. When warned of offensive-looking troop movements from across the western border Pavlov had shrugged it off and insisted that Stalin's assessment of Germany's intention was correct, "Never mind- those at the top know better than we do."²⁰¹ Unwilling to lose Minsk to the Germans, Stalin ordered Pavlov to counter-attack and suggested that he would rather have the western front, (a front being roughly the equivalent of a German army group), surrounded inside Minsk than let the city fall. The

¹⁹⁸ Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly*, 251-2.

¹⁹⁹ Service, *Stalin*, 417.

²⁰⁰ Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 47.

²⁰¹ Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly*, 98-9.

offensive was a disaster and many Red Army units were wasted against the battle-hardened Germans.²⁰²

For his failure to hold the Byelorussian capital Pavlov was arrested and sent to Moscow where he faced harsh Soviet justice. Facing the military tribunal with Pavlov were his chief of staff, his signals commander, an army commander, and various division commanders and commissars. The official charge was that of “causing damage to the fighting capacity of the Red Army.”²⁰³ They were all later shot.

Under torture Pavlov had named Meretskov as an accomplice in an anti-Soviet military conspiracy. The general who had dared to express his doubts about the Finnish war and afterward rewarded by Timoshenko for his insight was quickly picked up by the NKVD, interrogated and tortured, though never formally charged as a conspirator.²⁰⁴ In August Stalin signed Order No. 270, a brutal command which called for the punishment of family members should soldiers fail to live up to the Soviet leader’s conception of duty.²⁰⁵ On July 20 Stalin directed Beria to create special NKVD units to deal with “unreliable elements” in the military and examine cases of Red Army soldiers who escaped the Germans. Circumstantial evidence and a malevolent interpretation of events ensured that many defeatists and others were shot.²⁰⁶

The next year, commenting on the fighting in Stalingrad, Soviet journalist Vasily Grossman commented on the harshness of Soviet military justice, “We didn’t just receive

²⁰² Winchester, *Hitler’s War on Russia*, 46.

²⁰³ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 175; Berthon, *Warlords*, 93.

²⁰⁴ Roberts, *Stalin’s Wars*, 98.

²⁰⁵ Rzheshesky, Shaposhnikov (From Stalin’s Generals), 226-7.

²⁰⁶ Overy, *Russia’s War*, 82.

attacks, we had to attack. Retreat meant ruin. If you retreated, you'd be shot. If I did, I'd be shot..."²⁰⁷

By October, with the Germans pushing toward Moscow, the NKVD murdered around two hundred of its prisoners as it prepared to abandon the capital. Among those shot were the wife of Tukhachevsky and the former head of the Air Force, Rychagov.²⁰⁸

This latest chapter of terror, that following the German attack, was for all its brutality less dramatic than it could have been. Only Pavlov and the other officers of the Western Military District, along with a handful of others, were arrested in connection with the German attack. The military as a whole was not punished. The Red Army saw no large scale purges to rival the years 1937-8. In Beria's opinion the failure of the Red Army to halt the Germans at the border was excuse enough for another wave of terror, but Stalin refused.²⁰⁹ Stalin knew he needed military technical experts to fight the Germans and he wasn't going to sacrifice them simply to save face. The capable Meretskov, still imprisoned by the NKVD, was released in early September. The generals' reprieve came from Stalin with the words, "He's been cooling off long enough."²¹⁰

For all of Stalin's drive in setting up agencies to help the USSR combat the enemy, the dictator suffered from severe fears of a Soviet collapse. Not long after the German invasion began Stalin remarked following a Politburo meeting, "Lenin left us a

²⁰⁷ Vasily Grossman, *A Writer at War, A Soviet Journalist with the Red Army, 1941-1945* (Antony Beevor & Luba Vinogradove, Eds. & Trans.), (New York: Vintage Books, 2005), 155.

²⁰⁸ Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 59; Murphy, *What Stalin Knew*, 259-60.

²⁰⁹ Pleshakov, *Stalin's Folly*, 250.

²¹⁰ Rodric Braithwaite, *Moscow, 1941, A City and Its People At War* (New York: Vintage Books, 2006), 139.

great inheritance and we, his heirs, have fucked it all up.” A few days earlier Stalin had secluded himself at his country dacha. When Molotov and others arrived to prompt him to action Stalin asked warily, “Why have you come?”²¹¹ Upon returning from the front in July, 1941 Khrushchev met with Stalin in the Kirov Metro station in Moscow,

The man sat there devastated and couldn't say anything, not even any words of encouragement which I needed.... What I saw before me was a leader who was morally crushed. He was sitting on a couch. His face was empty... he was at a complete loss and didn't know what to do.²¹²

It is also important to note that during this period Stalin and the GKO were entertaining surrendering huge territories of the western USSR to the Germans in exchange for peace. The precedent of Brest-Litovsk had shown that territories ceded could be regained in time and at one point Stalin approached the Bulgarian ambassador to act as an intermediary with Hitler.²¹³ At the moment of crisis Stalin entertained abandoning much of the Soviet Union to maintain some of it. In any event the war continued without any serious offer of peace from Stalin.

The military crisis had swung the pendulum back in favor of party domination of the military. Stalin's authorization of dual command, his support of party influence in the military, his elevation of party cronies Beria, Georgy Malenkov and Lazar Kaganovich to the GKO, and his use of harsh justice meted out to old enemies and new scapegoats, all demonstrated his desire to subordinate the Red Army to the party during the crisis. His use of Stavka representatives illustrated his willingness to bypass the General Staff in the chain of command and interfere directly with military operations. As the pressure

²¹¹ Conquest, *Stalin*, 238-9.

²¹² Taubman, *Khrushchev*, 162-3.

²¹³ Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler*, 482-3.

mounted, and defeat at the hands of Hitler's Wehrmacht looked like a real possibility, Stalin not only sought to command the Red Army, but once again, through the agency of the Communist Party, he intended to dominate it completely.

The move to create a workable command and control system for the Red Army in the wake of the German invasion represented a critical combination of frantic improvisation, arbitrary leadership, and brutality that could only emerge in a totalitarian society in crisis mode. The last few weeks of the French Third Republic were characterized by military and political reshuffling, but nothing resembling the complete overhaul of the Soviet command apparatus or the brutal acts of a secret security force occurred. The events following June 22 1941 in the Soviet Union were unique in many ways. Never before, with the possible exception of Hitler, had a single ruler of a modern industrialized nation had so much power at the moment of attack. Stalin had no congress of any worth to answer to, the politburo was made entirely of yes-men, and the Red Army was thoroughly cowed. Keenly aware of his failure to see the attack coming, and for a time perhaps even fearing a coup, Stalin used his unparalleled authority, in conjunction with his generals and political cronies, to suddenly create an entirely new supreme military command structure with himself at the top.

What is remarkable about Stalin's domination of the Red Army during the war was his respect for his generals. Unlike Hitler, who as the war drew on began to equate reluctance to attack with timidity and defeatism, Stalin valued his generals' input, even when he disagreed with it. A case in point is Zhukov's insistence of abandoning Kiev to the Germans in favor of a more defensible position. A heated argument followed as Stalin insisted that the capital of the Soviet republic not fall, and Zhukov returned the

Soviet leader's rage as he explained the dire military situation. The meeting ended with Zhukov being relieved of his post as Chief of the General Staff, but Stalin soon invited the general to tea and assured him that he would remain a member of the Stavka.²¹⁴

Writing years later Zhukov paid tribute to the wartime Soviet leader for his role in the defense of Moscow,

I am often asked about Stalin's role in the battle... Stalin was in Moscow, in control of the troops and weapons, preparing the enemy's defeat. He must be given credit for the enormous work in organizing necessary strategic, material and technical resources which he did as head of the State Committee for Defense with the help of the executive staff of the People's Commissariats. With strictness and exactingness Stalin achieved the near-impossible.²¹⁵

With Stalin at the top the Soviet wartime apparatus of command which was created in the weeks following the German attack began to pay dividends by the end of the year before the Soviet capital.

Hitler's Drive to the East

Unlike the Soviet Union, Nazi Germany had no supreme war agency to decide general war policy and coordinate resources for the war effort. Within the hierarchy of German military planning nothing comparable to the Soviet GKO or even the British War Cabinet existed. The supreme strategic decisions taken by Germany during the course of the war ultimately came down to the personal inclinations of Hitler.²¹⁶ Stalin's domination of the GKO and the Stavka was to an extent tempered by the fact that it was a

²¹⁴ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 177-9.

²¹⁵ Zhukov, *The Memoirs of Marshal Zhukov*, 361.

²¹⁶ Evan Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, 4-5.

council in which various opinions were sought. Indeed as the war progressed Stalin came to listen to opposing opinions more and more, realizing his own military limitations.

Though the British War Cabinet was small it contained a distinctly democratic flair. Of the five man board three were Churchill Conservatives and two were Labor.²¹⁷

In June of 1939 Hitler had told Göring that in the event of war he intended a Reich Defense Council to be the premier war planning agency. After the outbreak of war in September such a council was created and included Deputy Führer Rudolf Hess, Interior Minister Wilhelm Frick, Reich Chancellery Chief Hans Lammers, General Georg Thomas, Keitel and Göring as Chairman. After a handful of meetings in which few attended Göring decided he could better handle questions of war resources through his Four Year Plan agency, and the Reich Defense Council effectively vanished.²¹⁸ Shortly after the Stalingrad crisis in early 1943 Josef Goebbels and Albert Speer attempted to revive the Reich Defense Council, nominally under Göring, to act as a Nazi civil government while Hitler was occupied with military matters. The resurrected Reich Defense Council never materialized in the face of the political machinations of Bormann and Himmler and the fact that Göring's star continued to fall with Hitler after heavy Allied bombing.²¹⁹ Had this council succeeded, and had Hitler been a less egomaniacal figure, a more rational approach to war planning may have guided Germany through the conflict.

²¹⁷ Kershaw, *Fateful Choices*, 24-5.

²¹⁸ Richard Overy, *Goering* (New York: Barnes & Noble, Inc., 1984), 100-1.

²¹⁹ Anthony Read, *The Devil's Disciples, Hitler's Inner Circle* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2003), 790-4.

The problem of this lack of supreme coordination in strategic planning is illustrated by the fundamental differences in strategic ideas between Hitler and OKH. Hitler's conception of modern war rested on economic and political factors where OKH stressed the elimination of the opposing army. With three army groups Barbarossa launched three separate directional offensives. Army Group North under Field Marshal Ritter von Leeb drove northeast through the Baltic States toward Leningrad, Army Group Centre under Field Marshal Fedor von Bock drove east through Byelorussian in the general direction of Moscow, and Army Group South under Field Marshal Gerd von Rundstedt moved east toward Kiev.²²⁰

For Hitler the drives toward Leningrad and Kiev were more important than the drive on the Soviet capital. As the cradle of Bolshevism and named for the founder of the Soviet Union, Leningrad held a special place in Soviet mythology. Its loss would be a major blow to Soviet morale, as well as denying the Red Army a major manufacturing center. Hitler viewed the Ukraine with its vast farmlands, coal mines, and proximity to Caucasian oil as the major economic engine of the Soviet Union. To deny this resource rich region to the Soviet Union was to savagely curtail its war making potential. For Hitler's generals the drive on Moscow was the vital axis of advance. They argued that the Red Army would pull out all of the stops to defend the Soviet capital and give the German Army the chance to destroy the Red Army in good order. Additionally, they

²²⁰ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 176-8.

reasoned, the loss of such an important rail hub would fatally cripple Soviet military traffic.²²¹

There are arguments for both lines of reasoning: Certainly the destruction of an opposing army is the ultimate goal before the imposition upon the enemy of one's political will can be achieved. The difference between Hitler and his generals emerged from their conceptions of how best to achieve this. Hitler sought an indirect destruction of the Red Army by denying it the means to wage modern war. OKH believed that a direct, head on clash would best bring this about. Hitler's conception was no doubt colored by his reading of history and knowledge that past Russian armies, when threatened with invasion, could always retreat and deny the invader its victory. In this sense, Hitler displayed a truly strategic view of the invasion of the Soviet Union that his generals, fixated on the military destruction of the Red Army through direct battle and the obvious target of the Soviet capital, did not.

The invasion began relatively smoothly for the German military chain of command. By August of 1941, however, Hitler was issuing orders contrary to established army and General Staff methods. Traditionally officers in the field had been given wide latitude within the operational objectives. The judgment of the man on the spot had been deemed of supreme importance in a campaign. As the Russian campaign intensified, however, Hitler began giving detailed orders to field officers instead of the broader 'outline instructions' that the army was used to. He also began dealing with

²²¹ Ibid.

Halder directly, bypassing Commander-in-Chief of the Army Brauchitsch.²²² By November Hitler was dealing directly with Army Group and Army commanders, completely circumventing the chain of command.²²³

The division of strategic opinion between Hitler and OKH, which perhaps never would have occurred had the Reich Defense Council succeeded in its mandate, proved to be a major point of contention between Hitler and his generals over the summer months. By August Hitler was ordering units from the drive on Moscow to support the flanking army groups. With Hitler ill for a few days Brauchitsch and Halder created a compromise strategy that satisfied no one and earned the Führer's further hostility toward them.²²⁴

By late September, with Kiev in German hands and Leningrad virtually surrounded Hitler at last agreed to a major commitment against Moscow. When his generals now told him that it was too late in the season for an offensive against the Soviet capital he responded with more disdain for his military leadership,

Before I became Chancellor, I used to think the General Staff was like a mastiff which had to be held tight by the collar to keep it from attacking anyone in sight.... (However) It is I who have always had to goad on this mastiff.²²⁵

'Operation Typhoon' was launched on the last day of September with aim of taking Moscow.

The sudden turn for the worse of the Russian weather slowed the operation significantly. Much more important factors in the slogging German advance however

²²² Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 142.

²²³ Bond, *Brauchitsch* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 94.

²²⁴ John Toland, *Adolf Hitler* (New York: Anchor Books, 1976), 678-9.

²²⁵ *Ibid.*, 684.

were the fierce Red Army resistance and the length of the German supply lines. The German Army maintained its lethality at this time. The numbers through the end of December show that the ratio was one-to twenty between Germans and Soviets soldiers killed.²²⁶ By mid-December, with a decision not reached before the gates of Moscow and facing fanatical Soviet counter-attacks, the German Army began pulling back to more defensible lines. When von Bock requested a general retreat Hitler refused and issued his 'Stand Fast' order to hold the army in place. The order undoubtedly saved the Wehrmacht from annihilation and ensured a strong defensive position to hold off the Soviets.²²⁷

Hitler issued the 'Stand Fast' order with the following words, General withdrawal is out of the question... the idea of preparing rear positions is just driveling nonsense. The only trouble at the front is that the enemy outnumbers us in soldiers. He does not have any more artillery. His soldiers are not nearly as good as ours.²²⁸

It is unfortunate that the successful use of this order in late 1941 was later used by Hitler to justify similar orders under much different, and more fatal, circumstances for the German Army. Nicolaus von Below, Hitler's Luftwaffe adjutant, later wrote of Hitler's growing mistrust and antipathy toward his generals. Hitler's belief in his superior military ability led him to overrule them on smaller tactical matters.²²⁹

Stalin too displayed firmness in his decision to remain in Moscow. The Soviet leader had told Zhukov and General Ivan Konev, the officers tasked with the defense of

²²⁶ Overy, *Russia's War*, 113, 177.

²²⁷ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 112.

²²⁸ Berthon, *The Warlords*, 125-6.

²²⁹ Ibid.

the city, “If you surrender, both your heads will roll.”²³⁰ At the end of November Stalin ordered Zhukov to launch a massive counter-attack. Zhukov protested by phone, and then finally went to see Stalin himself at the Kremlin. Showing Stalin his plans for a more modest attack the Soviet leader agreed, illustrating his growing faith in his military technicians.²³¹ Indeed, Stalin’s decision to remain in Moscow, though no doubt tinged with political considerations, was a major expression of faith in Zhukov and the Red Army leadership.²³²

At the same time Hitler’s faith in his generals was falling even further. Hitler’s dismissal of Brauchitsch as Commander-in-Chief of the Army on December 19, 1941 had profound implications for the army leadership and General Staff. Hitler simply did not replace Brauchitsch, he assumed the office for himself in the same way he had taken over Blomberg’s job three years earlier. Hitler’s contempt for Brauchitsch, and indeed all his generals, was evident in a statement he made on the justification of assuming the post,

Anybody can do that bit of operational planning. The task of a Commander-in-Chief is to educate the Army in a National Socialist sense. I don’t know a single general in the Army who is capable of doing that in the way I want it done. That is why I have decided to assume command of the Army myself.²³³

This decision inserted Hitler directly into the operational sphere of military planning and execution. While Hitler had interfered with operations almost as a matter of course before assuming this new post, he now had the ultimate command responsibility for them. Hitler did indeed have a strong sense of grand strategy, but he was simply not

²³⁰ Anfilov, *Zhukov* (From *Stalin’s Generals*), 351.

²³¹ Overy, *Russia’s War*, 118.

²³² Service, *Stalin*, 420.

²³³ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 406.

competent for this latest role. The ex-corporal from the Western Front had absolutely no training in the realm of military science.

The Chain of Command now went from Hitler as Head of State, to Hitler as Chief of the Wehrmacht, to Hitler as Commander-in-Chief of the Army, to Halder as Chief of the General Staff. Officially Halder now had direct access to the Führer and it is possible that the Chief of the General Staff saw in the new arrangement something approaching the former status that his office enjoyed. Perhaps the new system would resurrect the traditional imperial relationship of the Chief of the General Staff to the Head of State. It was not to be. Theoretically, the war in Russia would be handled by OKH while all other theaters fell within the purview of OKW.²³⁴ The authority of the General Staff, already waning, had been savagely and officially curtailed.

With Hitler now in the role of Commander-in-Chief of the Army Halder was left to 'carry on the business functions' of the war in Russia while the Chief of Staff of the Wehrmacht Keitel handled the administrative duties. This confirmed a partial merging of OKH and OKW that had already informally existed. Before long, Halder found himself bypassed in the same way that Brauchitsch had been. Hitler, weary of the army chain of command, preferred to issue his increasingly detailed orders through his personal military staff, OKW.²³⁵

Despite Hitler's arbitrary command style which ran counter to the interests of the General Staff, Halder began to attend Hitler's military conferences daily. During the period from the start of the war to Brauchitsch's dismissal he had attended only fifty-

²³⁴ Barry A. Leach, *Halder (From Hitler's Generals)*, 120.

²³⁵ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 151.

four. Now Halder would usually spend two hours a day in transit from his HQ in Angerburg to Hitler's HQ in Rastenburg, East Prussia- time no doubt the Chief of the General Staff could have put to better use.²³⁶

As a prisoner of the British after the war, Halder expressed to Lieutenant-General Heim his contempt for Hitler's military ability and his lust for blood. While sincerely looking for signs of genius in the Führer, Halder remarked that he utterly failed to find any. Heim told Halder of a conversation in which Hitler expressed to General von Reichenau delight that the SS formation Leibstandarte took such heavy losses in battle. Hitler said at the time, "Losses are never too high; they sow the seeds of greatness."²³⁷

Operation Barbarossa, the campaign that began with such great triumphs and ended in the frozen battlefields before Moscow started a process that put Hitler and the OKH/General Staff in almost constant crisis mode for the next four years. The generals at OKH found themselves fighting not only against the Soviet enemy, but against the increasingly intrusive operational orders from Hitler and the yes-men at OKW. Convinced of his own superior judgment in all matters, Hitler allowed his intuition and personal preferences dictate operations. At times, such as with the 'Stand Fast' order, he proved correct. More and more often, however, his unwillingness to face facts and his blatant contempt for his generals ensured military inefficiency, ineffectiveness, and ultimately defeat.

Hitler's obstinacy was born of the setbacks in Russia, but it couldn't have occurred at a worse time. Even as Hitler was relying more and more on his own

²³⁶ Leach, *Halder (From Hitler's Generals)*, 121.

²³⁷ Franz Halder, secretly taped conversation with Lieutenant-General Heim (London: *Interrogations of Captured German Officers*, Public Record Office).

judgment over that of his generals his greatest adversary, Josef Stalin, was coming to rely more and more on the advice of his military specialists. Both men often flew off the handle and berated their military leaders, but Stalin's pretensions to military understanding could be curtailed by the defeat of his plans. Hitler always found scapegoats.

Both Hitler and Stalin were military amateurs who controlled the largest armies in the greatest war in human history.²³⁸ At the critical moment, however, one was learning to trust his military specialists while one was growing consistently more disgusted with his own. This difference in command style and military outlook proved to be a major factor in the Soviet victory over Germany in 1945.

²³⁸ Overy, *The Dictators*, 496.

CHAPTER 5

IN THE BALANCE

Ebb and Flow

The battle of Moscow at the end of 1941 marked the end of the immediate crisis that had begun on June 22 with the launch of Operation Barbarossa. The successful defense of the city gave the Soviet Union its first major victory over the Nazi invaders and disproved the theory of German military invincibility. It also blunted for several months Germany's strategic initiative though not its tenacity and its ability to hold onto its gains of the previous months.

Stalin, overly confident after his first victory, insisted on counter-attacks in the hope that the German Army was on its last leg and would soon retreat out of Soviet territory all together. In the final hour of the crisis he had turned to his generals and they had given him a success at Moscow. He now discarded their advice and again relied upon his own intuition and wishful thinking. For Hitler, the failure before Moscow was a setback, a temporary reverse that would be rectified in 1942. His opinion of his generals, never high, suffered further after Moscow and ensured that he too would engage in his own brand of wishful thinking. The dictators had little use for their military specialists at the dawn of the new year. The amateurs had their own plans.

Stalin's awareness of his reliance on his generals during the battle of Moscow left him of two minds. On one hand he was elated that the military technicians had ended the immediate crisis and given the Soviet Union a victory; on the other hand he was jealous of their accomplishment and felt the need to reassert his personal authority. Zhukov's name was conspicuously absent from a list of officers to receive honors for the defense of the capital. Indeed, Stalin had insisted that he be left out even as Zhukov's top commanders, Kuznetsov, Rokossovsky, and Vlasov were being lauded in the pages of *Pravda*. Stalin's desire to outgeneral his generals led him to create a plan for a general offensive. In early January he revealed his strategy for the relief of Leningrad, a bold thrust against the German center before Moscow, and a drive into the Ukraine. Zhukov argued against the scheme, which was to begin shortly, while most other generals remained silent.²³⁹

Zhukov instead pressed for a single, powerful blow at the German center.

Countering this argument, Stalin said,

The Germans are now in a state of confusion after their defeat at Moscow.... They are badly prepared for winter. This is the time for launching a general offensive.... We must grind up the Germans more quickly so that they will not be able to attack in the spring.²⁴⁰

Marshal Shaposhnikov and other generals agreed to the attacks largely because they saw the futility of argument when Stalin's mind was set on a course of action. Following the meeting he spoke with Zhukov, "You argued in vain... the directives have already been given out to almost all army groups."²⁴¹ Zhukov exclaimed exasperation to

²³⁹ Overy, *Russia's War*, 122; Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 65.

²⁴⁰ Berthon, *The Warlords*, 129-30.

²⁴¹ Ibid.

Shaposhnikov, his successor as Chief of the General Staff, at why Stalin would call a war council and ask for advice for an operation already planned and ready to go into effect. Indeed it was Stalin, and not the General Staff, who planned the three pronged offensive.²⁴²

This meeting illustrates Stalin's desire to interfere in the operational sphere as well. As head of government and Supreme Commander, Stalin undoubtedly had a major role to play in Red Army strategy, and many times, like Hitler, he made correct decisions that benefited his military and nation. Like Hitler, Stalin also had no professional military training and his understanding of operations was poor. His insistence on holding Minsk and Kiev lead to disastrous results the previous year. In early 1942 Stavka contained proven military personnel, but they were either still cowed or overruled by Stalin.²⁴³

It is possible that Stalin's desire to take the offensive was based in part on his reading of his new allies. In December the United States had joined the war, giving new hope to both Britain and the Soviet Union in their fight against Germany. Stalin's offensives were perhaps based on the hope that Britain and the United States would soon launch a cross-channel attack on France. While the complexity of such an attack was enormous, Stalin's military amateurishness probably viewed such an attack as within the capabilities of his two allies by early 1942. His hope for such an attack in the West by his allies probably sparked his desire to make significant gains in the East.²⁴⁴

²⁴² Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 298.

²⁴³ Glantz, *Colossus Reborn*, 616-8.

²⁴⁴ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*. 340.

Events surrounding the assault on the forces besieging Leningrad were typical of the Soviet failures along the line. The recently rehabilitated Meretskov was placed in command of the newly formed Volkov Front and ordered to attack before sufficient supplies had been brought up. Stiff German resistance foiled Meretskov's ill prepared attacks and by early March little progress had been made. Stalin dispatched Voroshilov and Malenkov as Stavka representatives to discover the cause. By late April the complete failure of the front to make any significant dent in the German line, and the threat to General Andrey Vlasov's 2nd Shock Army determined the matter. The Volkov Front was disbanded and the armies were placed under General Mihail Khozin, commander of the Leningrad Front. By late June the 2nd Shock Army was surrounded and lost. From January to June the Volkov Front and the units later detached from it lost over 120,000 men.²⁴⁵

All three attacks proved to be colossal military blunders. The failure to liberate Leningrad or retake Kharkov or the Crimea only illustrated Stalin's inability to realistically assess the situation and make operational plans accordingly. The attacks resulted in nearly half a million Soviet casualties for less than 100,000 German casualties. Soviet manpower was not lacking, but widespread access to modern weapons and equipment within the Red Army, to say nothing of troops with poor offensive experience, doomed the attacks.²⁴⁶ During the offensives, Stalin didn't hesitate to telephone army commanders and issue orders over the heads of the General Staff and

²⁴⁵ Victor Kamenir, *Slaughter Before Leningrad*, World War II Magazine (Leesburg: Primedia, February, 2002), 51-6.

²⁴⁶ Overy, *Russia's War*, 122.

front commanders.²⁴⁷ Even with the supposedly superior military direction of Stalin the attacks achieved little.

It was in mid-March, when the offensives had been all but spent, that Shaposnikov and his deputy Vasilevsky convinced Stalin to adopt a general strategic posture of defense. Stalin reluctantly agreed, but only after hammering home his opinions of the value of attack,

Don't let us sit down in defense, with our hands folded, while the Germans attack first! We must ourselves strike a series of blows to forestall them on a broad front and upset enemy preparations...

Eventually, a compromise was reached in which smaller attacks were still carried out within the larger framework of general defense.²⁴⁸

In May the battles in the Crimea gave Stalin the opportunity to define the responsibilities of the Stavka representative. Mekhlis, serving as Stavka representative to the Crimean Front, severely disagreed over operational matters with the front's commander, General Vasily Kozlov. When Mekhlis wrote to Stalin, detailing his opinion of Kozlov's decisions and distancing himself from responsibility, the Soviet leader issued a sharp rebuke,

You are adopting the strange position of a detached observer who accepts no responsibility for the affairs of the (Crimean Front). This is a very comfortable position, but is one which absolutely stinks. On the Crimean Front, you- you- are no detached onlooker but a responsible representative of the Stavka, responsible for all the success and failures of the Front and obliged to correct errors by the command on the spot.... Your task in the Crimea is not complicated and you should be able to deal with it...²⁴⁹

²⁴⁷ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 335.

²⁴⁸ Ibid., 336-8.

²⁴⁹ Ibid., 348.

For Stalin the Stavka representative served as a co-commander in the greatest traditions of the practice of dual command. The representative was the ultimate political commissar and ensured not only party oversight, but Stalin's direct line to the front commanders.

Stalin's sudden optimism and faith in his own abilities following the victory over the Germans at Moscow was nearly his undoing. In competing with his generals for military glory and seeking a quick defeat over his enemies instead of a longer, more calculated and careful approach, Stalin failed to capitalize on the Moscow victory. By husbanding his forces and launching a single, powerful attack as Zhukov pushed for, Leningrad, Kharkov, or the Crimea could have been taken from the enemy. Instead Stalin grasped for all three and came up with nothing, his position significantly weaker in June than it had been in January.

The victory at Moscow had given Stalin and his generals breathing room and the Soviet leader chose to reassert his command position. While at the height of the crisis he had turned to his military technicians in desperation, the respite once again saw him attempting to dominate the Red Army leadership. Most of his military remained cowed, the memories of Tukhachevsky's fate still forefront in their minds. Those who did object were ignored. Stalin's power was absolute. As his failed operational plan illustrated however, his military judgment and had yet to be developed.

After the failure to take Moscow Hitler and the German Army leadership had two goals for 1942. The first was to defend the vast areas of the Soviet Union that had been taken during the previous year's campaign, and the second was to prepare for a second great offensive to damage the Soviet Union beyond its ability to recover. With these two

critical missions to perform logic dictated that the best and most experienced German military minds be put to the challenge. Instead, Hitler decided to punish scapegoats.

Even as Soviet newspapers were celebrating many Red Army officers for the successful defense of Moscow, Hitler was looking to make negative examples of those he blamed for 'Operation Typhoon.' As mentioned above, when Army Commander-in-Chief Walter von Brauchitsch requested to be relieved of his duties owing to ill health he was replaced by Hitler himself.²⁵⁰ Also in December Field Marshals Rundstedt and Bock were sacked from their posts as commanders of Army Group South and Army Group Centre, to be replaced by Walter von Reichenau and Günther von Kluge. This period also saw the dismissal of generals Guderian, Leeb, Erich Hoepner, Helmüth Förster, Hans Graf von Sponeck, and Adolf Strauss.²⁵¹

The dismissal of so many of his generals following the failure to take Moscow no doubt reflected Hitler's need place blame at the army's doorstep. Hitler's personality was such that he could not admit his responsibility for the failure. Despite Hitler's reasons, however, it is possible that other factors had something to do with the late 1941/early 1942 reshuffling. Guderian's memoirs are filled with vitriol toward von Kluge and the panzer general recorded an argument between them shortly before his dismissal. Indeed, Guderian almost certainly blamed von Kluge rather than Hitler for his removal.²⁵² Out of those fired Rundstedt was the only one who returned to Germany by a special train with an honor guard. Hitler later apologized to the field marshal for his dismissal and

²⁵⁰ Karl-Heinz Janssen, *Walter von Brauchitsch- Der überforderte Feldherr* (From *Die Militärelite Des Dritten Reiches*), 94-5.

²⁵¹ Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 65-6; Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 455.

²⁵² Guderian, *Panzer General*, 270; Hart, *Guderian*, 80.

blamed the incident on a simple misunderstanding.²⁵³ Whatever the reasons for the dismissals the public message was clear- the generals, not the führer, was to blame for the failure to take Moscow.

The circumstances surrounding Rundstedt's dismissal illustrate Hitler's contempt for even his most valued military technicians. Rostov, the gateway to the Caucasus, had been captured by units of Army Group South in late November. Fearing encirclement by Soviet forces a week later, Rundstedt prudently ordered an evacuation of the city and a thirty mile retreat. When Hitler heard of the retreat he countermanded Rundstedt's order and commanded that Rostov be held. Rundstedt quickly replied,

It is madness to attempt to hold. First the troops cannot do it and second if they do not retreat they will be destroyed. I repeat that this order must be rescinded or that you find someone else.²⁵⁴

Hitler was enraged by the ultimatum. Rather than discuss the situation with von Brauchitsch, still at this time Army Commander-in-Chief, Hitler fired Rundstedt with the simple reply, "I am acceding to your request. Please give up your command."²⁵⁵

As these events illustrate, Hitler now had no time for the chain of command. It was the direct responsibility of OKH to hire and fire army group commanders, not the head of state nor even the defense minister. For Hitler the legal rights and responsibilities of the higher command were inconsequential. He was in charge and he would make the decisions. When Brauchitsch asked to be relieved of his post Hitler only confirmed in theory what had been taking place in fact: Adolf Hitler was the Commander-in-Chief of the German Army.

²⁵³ Ziemke, *Rundstedt (From Hitler's Generals)*, 197.

²⁵⁴ Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 689.

²⁵⁵ Ibid.

The dismissal of at least one of the generals had an unexpected consequence for Hitler. Erich Hoepner was relieved after his 4th armored corps retreated following a severe Soviet counter-attack near Moscow. Infuriated at Hoepner's withdrawal, Hitler not only fired him but forbade him to wear a uniform or collect his army pension. Hoepner later successfully sued the state for his pension rights and proved Hitler's lack of total control at this time over the military and the German courts. Because of his treatment at Hitler's hands Hoepner soon became active in the anti-Nazi military conspiracy.²⁵⁶

The failure to take Moscow was an intolerable event for Hitler. It was the first time the German Army had stopped short of its objective since the war began nearly two and half years earlier. It also represented the greater fact that the Soviet Union had not altogether collapsed after repeated military setbacks in the previous months. Hitler had treated his generals poorly enough when they were winning, how much more derision he would heap upon them now that victory refused to come as easily.

Hitler pulled the reins of the OKH tighter. He even forbade the General Staff from playing war games to prepare for probable military scenarios.²⁵⁷ The reorganization of command on the Eastern Front was Hitler's reaction to this disaster. On one hand it absolved himself from blame before Germany and the rest of the world. On the other it allowed him to place in positions of command officers he felt more closely lived up to his version of the National Socialist ideal. To Hitler this ideal was the simple belief that willpower, courage, and determination alone could bring victory. Though his strategic

²⁵⁶ Robert Wistrich, *Who's Who in Nazi Germany* (New York: Bonanza Books, 1982), 152-3; Kershaw, *Hitler, 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 507.

²⁵⁷ Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 63-4.

astuteness had not completely abandoned him by this point, the era of the Führer's wishful thinking had begun.

Stalingrad

The battle of Moscow had temporarily taken the strategic initiative out of Germany's hands. Stalin's clumsy attempts to wrest control of the strategic initiative by simultaneously attacking in three directions earned for the Soviet Union the results they merited. The Red Army offensives were beaten back all along the line and the German Army was able to consolidate its position, re-supply itself, and prepare for a second grand offensive against the Soviet Union. Red Army soldiers could take a measure of confidence in their victory at Moscow, even if subsequent operations had failed. German soldiers were aware that they were not as strong as they had been the previous summer, but neither were the Soviets. One more great push was sure to win the war.

'Case Blue' was the name given to the German Army's grand offensive against the Soviet Union. In line with Hitler's view that the best way to defeat the Soviet Union was to rob it of its resources, the aim of the offensive was the conquest of the Eastern Ukraine and the oilfields of the Caucuses. Hitler now formally enjoyed the direct command of the army and he was determined that his total control bring military victory.

The campaign initially saw great German success. General Rudolf Schmundt, Hitler's army adjutant, kept track of the advance on a map at Hitler's headquarters, impressing civilians who happened to be present. Intoxicated by the early victories, Hitler again railed against his generals' timidity and hailed his own military insight. While OKH had wished to maintain the army's largely defensive posture and straighten

out the front line, Hitler had insisted upon attack. Three weeks into the campaign Hitler transferred his headquarters deeper into the Ukraine near the town of Vinnitsa.²⁵⁸

The early gains soon provided new challenges. This in turn only exacerbated the tension between Hitler and his Chief of the General Staff. Manstein wrote that in the summer of 1942 he was appalled to find that the relations between Hitler and Halder had become so strained. In characteristic tantrums Hitler would heap scorn upon the soldiers after military setbacks. When Halder attempted to defend them Hitler turned his wrath upon him. In utter shock at what was for him a considerable breach of the respect due the General Staff and the army, Manstein took Schmundt aside and told him that the head of state simply could not speak to the Chief of the General Staff in such terms. He demanded that Halder's advice be listened to respectfully.²⁵⁹

Halder's war diary entry of July 23, 1942 illustrates the strained feelings between he and Hitler as victory in Russia proved ever more elusive:

This chronic tendency to underrate the enemy capabilities is gradually assuming grotesque proportions and develops into a positive danger. The situation is getting more and more intolerable.... This so called leadership is characterized by a pathological reacting to the impressions of the moment and a total lack of any understanding of the command machinery and its possibilities.²⁶⁰

On August 24 the two men had a major argument which devolved into a shouting match over Hitler's unwillingness to allow the Ninth Army to retreat from Rzhev. Hitler accused Halder of being unable to make the tough decisions. With this display most

²⁵⁸ Albert Speer, *Inside the Third Reich, Memoirs by Albert Speer* (Richard and Clara Winston, Trans.), (New York: MacMillan Publishing Company, 1970), 236.

²⁵⁹ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 261-2.

²⁶⁰ Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 529.

officers saw that Halder would soon be on his way out.²⁶¹ With the looming threat of the Stalingrad crisis in September Halder would prove to be another convenient scapegoat for the Führer.²⁶²

On the 24th, when Halder continued to press his concerns on Hitler that the German flank at Stalingrad was dangerously exposed, Hitler dismissed him. Citing their numerous disagreements and the stress which the General Staff had caused him, Hitler went on to state that what the army needed was the “glow of National Socialist conviction,” something that Halder and other ‘old school’ officers could not bring to the table. Count Ciano, Italy’s foreign minister, felt that Halder’s dismissal was a ‘bad sign.’²⁶³ Halder wrote in his diary: “My nerves are worn out; also his (Hitler’s) are no longer fresh.... He is determined to enforce his will also on the army.”²⁶⁴

Walter Görlitz noted that Halder’s dismissal marked the end of German military success and the beginning of its military defeats.²⁶⁵ Both Halder and his predecessor Beck had been products of the German military tradition. They both had been selected by Hitler, but only after careful recommendations made within the established army chain of command. Both men, extremely technically competent, had the bad luck to have served during the Third Reich where Hitler’s power games and increased meddling in the operational fields of war ensured the marginalization of the General Staff.

About this same time Hitler fired the commander of Army Group A, Field Marshal Wilhelm List, for failing to advance rapidly enough. With his contempt for his generals

²⁶¹ Ibid., 531-2.

²⁶² Leach, *Halder* (From *Hitler's Generals*), 121.

²⁶³ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 418.

²⁶⁴ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 168.

²⁶⁵ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 418.

continually on the rise, Hitler himself took command of the army group despite the fact that his headquarters was 700 miles away.²⁶⁶ He eventually relinquished the position to Field Marshal Ewald von Kleist in early November when the Soviets began their counterattack at Stalingrad.²⁶⁷

Halder's successor as Chief of the General Staff, Kurt Zeitzler, had first caught Hitler's eye when he had served as Chief of Staff to Kleist's panzer army in Russia. His efforts in repulsing the Allied raid at Dieppe, France won him Hitler's further admiration and the order to replace Halder.²⁶⁸ This was an unusual appointment as Zeitzler had never been part of the 'leading clique' within the Troop Office or the General Staff.²⁶⁹

It was Zeitzler's 'drive, energy, and fighting spirit' that Hitler appreciated in his new Chief of the General Staff.²⁷⁰ No doubt Zeitzler's relative youth accounted for much of the new dynamism that he brought to the position. With the exception of Hans Krebs, the ineffectual last Chief of the General Staff who served a bare month before the end of the Third Reich, every Chief of the General Staff had begun his tenure while in his mid-fifties or older. By contrast Zeitzler was only forty-seven when Hitler appointed him to the post.

About the same time as Zeitzler took over for Halder, Hitler, rapidly losing his already depleted faith in the General Staff, relived that organization of the responsibility for the staff personnel appointments. This allowed Hitler to maintain direct control over

²⁶⁶ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 402-3.

²⁶⁷ Samuel W. Mitcham, Jr., *Kleist (From Hitler's Generals)*, 255.

²⁶⁸ Hart, *The German Generals Talk*, 57-8.

²⁶⁹ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 419-20.

²⁷⁰ Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945: Nemesis*, 649-50.

the selection of General Staff officers.²⁷¹ Hitler exercised this new authority not through OKW, but through his adjutant, Schmundt. Also, in an attempt to further indoctrinate the army with National Socialist ideology, Hitler created the National Socialist Leadership Organization to act as spies and Nazi propagandists within the officer corps itself.²⁷²

By the beginning of the Stalingrad crisis Hitler was no longer taking meals with OKW or OKH officers. Instead it was his military adjutants like Schmundt who began to exercise more and more influence upon him.²⁷³ This new clique of adjutants represented yet another power group within Germany's military, to say nothing of other agencies competing for the Führer's time and favor like the Nazi Party and SS.

Despite Hitler's growing impatience with the army leadership Zeitzler's tenure as Chief of the General Staff began with the full confidence of the Führer. Zeitzler worked quickly to delineate the responsibilities between the General Staff and OKW. Having once worked under Jodl, Zeitzler had been a strong proponent of the idea of a unified armed forces command. Now that he himself commanded the army under Hitler, however, he resented OKW intrusion into what he believed was his sphere. For Zeitzler, the Russian front was the exclusive province of OKH and the General Staff and he tenaciously opposed any attempt made by OKW to assert its authority there.²⁷⁴

As the Stalingrad crisis worsened and Zeitzler began to realistically appreciate the dire straits of the German army, his relations with Hitler rapidly deteriorated. By October, 1942 the friction between the two men was evident. Zeitzler held Hitler's desire

²⁷¹ Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 275.

²⁷² Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 421.

²⁷³ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 168.

²⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 161, 168.

to make the battle lines on maps more ascetically pleasing in justified contempt. Hitler came to believe that Zeitzler, whose initial drive he had so admired, was not the ‘General of the Revolution’ he had believed him to be. To make matters worse, Zeitzler would not accept the bribes that Hitler offered to tie his generals to him.²⁷⁵

Though by December, 1942 Goebbels was writing in his diary that “The appointment of Zeitzler has done a lot of good,” the situation between the Führer and his Chief of the General Staff was anything but.²⁷⁶ Zeitzler and Hitler argued over the fate of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad, the Chief of the General Staff insisting that it be allowed to attempt escape. He went so far as to tell Hitler that it was a crime to leave the Sixth Army stranded there.²⁷⁷ Hitler was also annoyed by Zeitzler’s attempt to dramatize the suffering of the Sixth Army when he ordered that he and his staff be limited to the same rations as the trapped army. When he began to visibly lose weight, Hitler countermanded the order and insisted that he eat.²⁷⁸

Shortly after his appointment to Chief of the General Staff, Zeitzler recommended that the Stalingrad offensive be abandoned. The commander of the Sixth Army, General Friedrich Paulus, whose command was mired in urban fighting and deprived of tactical maneuver, initially agreed. When Schmundt intimated Paulus’ star would rise with Hitler if he took the city, the commander of Sixth Army showed a new enthusiasm for the task.²⁷⁹

²⁷⁵ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 424.

²⁷⁶ Joseph Goebbels *Diaries, 1942-1943* (Louis P. Lochner Ed. & Trans.), (New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1948), 253.

²⁷⁷ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 424-6.

²⁷⁸ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 277-9.

²⁷⁹ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 421.

With the crushing Soviet blows against the German flanks that ensured the encirclement of Sixth Army, Hitler ordered Paulus not to break out. This was no vague order simply telling Paulus to hold his position. Hitler ordered precisely where each of his divisions should defend the pocket.²⁸⁰ Manstein, now commanding the newly created Army Group Don and Paulus' immediate superior, refused to order a breakout for the Sixth Army even as he tried futilely to break through to it. Manstein did let Paulus know that he would support Paulus' decision if the Sixth Army commander himself decided to attempt a breakout.²⁸¹ Despite their knowledge of the Sixth Army's hopeless position at Stalingrad, neither general would order a breakout. Fear of facing the Führer's wrath was more powerful than avoiding military disaster.

Hitler elevated Paulus to the rank of field marshal in the hopes of stiffening his resolve or inducing him to commit suicide. The day after his promotion Paulus surrendered to the Red Army. Upon hearing the news Hitler bellowed,

In peacetime Germany, about 18,000 or 20,000 people a year chose to commit suicide, even without being in such a position. Here is a man who sees 50,000 or 60,000 of his soldiers die defending themselves bravely to the end. How can he surrender himself to the Bolsheviks!²⁸²

Later,

What hurts me most, personally, is that I still promoted him to field marshal. I wanted to give him this final satisfaction... a man like that besmirches the heroism of so many others at the last moment. He could have freed himself from all sorrow and ascended into eternity and national immortality, but he prefers to go to Moscow.²⁸³

²⁸⁰ John Erickson, *The Road to Berlin, Stalin's War with Germany, Volume Two* (London: Cassell, 1983), 4.

²⁸¹ Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 112.

²⁸² Overy, *Russia's War*, 185.

²⁸³ F. W. von Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles* (Trans. H. Betzler), (Old Saybrook: Konecky & Konecky, 1956), 201.

Paulus' actions only further blighted the officer corps in Hitler's eyes. If a field marshal could not be trusted at the critical hour then who could?

The failure to take Stalingrad illustrates Hitler's reach far exceeding his grasp. In the attempt to take the city while also investing significant resources in the Crimea and throughout the Eastern Front, the German Army had extended itself too far consequently and left its lines vulnerable. When asked after the war why the battle for Stalingrad had ended in disaster Halder replied, "Because we had only a fraction of the forces which were needed."²⁸⁴

The replacement of Halder with the younger and more dynamic Zeitzler had soon lost its charm and the failure of the Sixth Army at Stalingrad was too large a defeat to simply write off as the cost of doing business on the Eastern Front. The prospect for total victory over the Soviet Union had died in the snows of Stalingrad and Hitler ensured the blame fell squarely upon the army. Hitler's constant meddling in the operational and tactical realms proved as disastrous for the German Army as Stalin's interference had been to the Red Army earlier in the year.

Late spring of 1942 found a more sober Stalin and his generals preparing for the German offensive. The Red Army leadership had convinced Stalin of the need for retreats in the face of German military superiority. Perhaps humbled by his failure with the winter and spring offensives the Soviet leader was more willing to listen to the advice of his generals. This new willingness on Stalin's part of authorizing limited withdrawals,

²⁸⁴ Franz Halder, secretly taped conversation with Lieutenant-General Heim, (London: *Interrogations of Captured German Officers*, Public Record Office).

though within the larger framework of a general no-retreat policy, allowed the Red Army to gain valuable experience in avoiding encirclement. While the Red Army suffered many casualties with the launch of Hitler's 'Case Blue' they were significantly less than those suffered the previous summer. To the Germans the fact that they were taking fewer prisoners was interpreted to mean that the Red Army was on its last leg.²⁸⁵

Like Hitler two years later believing that the cross-channel attack was due to land at the Pas de Calais instead of the Normandy beaches, Stalin refused to believe that the Nazis would attack anywhere but Moscow for their summer offensive. The rapid advance of the German Army in the Ukraine was written off as an elaborate ruse to draw men and resources away from the Soviet capital. Even when the actual operational plans of 'Case Blue' found their way by chance into the hands of Soviet intelligence, Stalin wrote them off as disinformation and berated his intelligence officers.²⁸⁶

Stalin was not alone in his belief that Moscow would be the main target of the German offensive. Many of his generals shared this view and advocated strengthening the capital's defenses at the expense of other operational sectors.²⁸⁷ By late August it became apparent to both Stalin and his generals that Moscow was not Hitler's aim. Realizing its miscalculation with growing dread, the GKO summoned Zhukov to the Kremlin, conveyed to him its concerns, and dispatched him as Stavka representative to the Stalingrad sector. Stalin told Zhukov that it was duty to defend the city to the last and

²⁸⁵ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 126-7.

²⁸⁶ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 342.

²⁸⁷ Overy, *Russia's War*, 157.

in one great show of faith promoted him to Deputy Supreme Commander under Stalin himself.²⁸⁸

Zhukov arrived in Stalingrad with the charge to oversee a major counter-attack. Finding Red Army units nowhere near ready for the fight Zhukov called Stalin and persuaded him to hold up the attack for a few days. Nervous, Stalin called his Chief of the General Staff, Vasilevsky, and asked the position of German units. When Stalin learned that German tanks were in position in Stalingrad's suburbs, he raged at his generals,

What's the matter with them, don't they understand that if we surrender Stalingrad, the south of the country will be cut off from the centre and will probably not be able to defend it? Don't they realize that this is not only a catastrophe for Stalingrad? We would lose our main waterway and soon our oil, too!²⁸⁹

Stalin realized the strategic implications of the loss of the city, and once again he desired to meddle in the operational sphere by forcing a premature attack.

As the Germans continued to bludgeon their way into Stalingrad and its environs, making repeated attacks in an attempt to reach the Volga River, General Vasili Chuikov and his 62nd Army held fast. Aware of the Wehrmacht's use of operational maneuver in order to encircle the enemy, Chuikov ordered his units to fight close and negate the German advantage in mobility. "Grab them by the belt," was a common expression Chuikov used as the combatants fought a street by street, building by building struggle.²⁹⁰

In Moscow, Stalin was desperate to save the city which bore his name. For Stalin this meant to give Chuikov whatever he needed to hold the enemy back and to launch

²⁸⁸ Overy, *The Dictators*, 531.

²⁸⁹ Antony Beevor, *Stalingrad, The Fateful Siege, 1942-1943* (London: Penguin Books, 1998), 117.

²⁹⁰ Dennis Showalter, *Stalingrad*, *World War II Magazine* (Leesburg: Primedia, January, 2003), 35.

local counter-attacks when possible. In mid September Zhukov and Vasilevsky met with the Soviet leader and offered a bold plan. The two had worked out a scheme to hit the German flanks in a series of great, crushing blows. Stalin was critical, as it meant husbanding resources that Chuikov desperately needed, but the plan was accepted and preparations for offensive, named 'Operation Uranus' began.²⁹¹ The buildup of forces for the operation included one million men, 1,000 tanks, 1,400 planes, and 14,000 heavy guns.²⁹²

Zhukov and Vasilevsky were charged with visiting front and army commanders in the Stalingrad sector. Together they surveyed the geography of the area and consulted on the general military realities of the situation, though Stalin forbade them to discuss in detail the coming offensive.²⁹³ The operation was prepared secretly. Stalin allowed the front and army commanders, once they were brought into the loop, time to prepare. All were properly briefed and each unit commander thoroughly knew his responsibilities. The days of hurried preparations and uncertain orders were passed. This operation was not going to be rushed as had those of the previous winter.²⁹⁴

The operation launched in late November and was a major success, trapping Paulus' Sixth Army inside the city and ensuring its eventual surrender. German attacks to relive Paulus came to nothing and the pocket proved to be impossible to supply from air. The Sixth Army surrendered on February 2nd.

²⁹¹ Overy, *Russia's War*, 168-9.

²⁹² Showalter, *Stalingrad*, 36.

²⁹³ Erickson, *The Road to Stalingrad*, 426.

²⁹⁴ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 149; Overy, *Russia's War*, 177.

Stalin's inclination had been to hold the city by sending everything he could spare to Chuikov. Holding Stalingrad had been his overriding passion. Yet he was willing to listen to his military experts and favor their judgment over his own. After the Sixth Army had been surrounded Stalin was eager to crush it, using 2nd Guards Army under General Rodion Malinovsky. Malinovsky convinced Stalin that the Sixth Army could wait while he turned to meet elements of Manstein's Army Group Don, then attempting to relieve Paulus. Malinovsky blunted the German attack and ensured that no German breakthrough occurred.²⁹⁵ Once again Stalin's general willingness to defer to the judgment of his military technicians ensured Soviet success.

This new deference to his military leadership was not total, however. Occasionally Stalin felt the need to make operational decisions without consulting Zhukov or the General Staff. One such episode was Stalin's decision to make Rokossovsky the front commander during the operation. Zhukov, who had spent the preceding weeks selecting commanders for the various positions, was taken aback as Stalin had generally agreed with Zhukov's preparations across the board.²⁹⁶ Despite his deference to his military technicians, Stalin still insisted on having a hand in the operational sphere.

As the crisis intensified before the Soviet attack, dual command was once again abolished on October 9. Officially this move reflected the state and party's faith in military units which had proven their loyalty in blood since the previous year. In reality this was another acknowledgement of the importance of the military technician and the

²⁹⁵ John Erickson, *Malinovsky* (From *Stalin's Generals*), 120.

²⁹⁶ Service, *Stalin*, 427.

folly of second guessing him. The move was controversial, as many commissars felt that morale would fall without their political guidance. In any case some commissars were transferred to work as military propagandists while others were taken into the Red Army as junior officers.²⁹⁷

In the wake of the victory at Stalingrad morale in the Soviet Union improved tremendously and Stalin basked in this latest Red Army victory. The press hailed the ‘great captain of the Soviet people’ and ‘the great organizer of our victories.’ The hated symbol of rank from Tsarist days, gold shoulder boards, returned.²⁹⁸ Indeed, British officials became angry at consignments of gold braid taking up space on shipments to the Soviet Union, despite the fact that the return of such emblems noted a marked shift for the better in Red Army command and control, and hence better fighting efficiency.²⁹⁹

A series of promotions followed, among them Vasilevsky’s elevation to full general and Rokossovsky’s to colonel-general. Zhukov was promoted Marshal of the Soviet Union.³⁰⁰ At this time Stalin allowed himself to be promoted to Marshal as well, having never previously held military rank.³⁰¹ This is very telling. With the latest victory, one which held off a major enemy attack and devoured an entire German army, Stalin felt confident enough to identify himself as a member of the Red Army, not merely its master. For all of his supposed military genius, Hitler never deigned to join the German officer class by accepting the title of field marshal. Even in the glory following

²⁹⁷ Roberts, *Stalin’s Wars*, 133-4.

²⁹⁸ Beevor, *Stalingrad*, 404.

²⁹⁹ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 40.

³⁰⁰ Ibid., 38-9.

³⁰¹ Overy, *Russia’s War*, 185.

the French surrender when twelve generals were elevated to the rank, Hitler preferred to remain apart from and above the German Army.

The military relationship between Stalin and his generals changed after Stalingrad. The Soviet leader increasingly listened not only to senior generals and marshals like Zhukov, but also front and divisional commanders.³⁰² Stalin had so looked down upon the General Staff a year earlier that he planned his three offensives virtually without them. Now he had a new respect for the war planning organization and witnessed first hand its contribution to the victory at Stalingrad. The General Staff began to take on the role of the Stavka's engine, driving the Red Army toward victory.³⁰³ Zhukov later stated that it was during the battle of Stalingrad that the Soviet leader finally began to grasp the fundamentals of military planning and execution of operations.³⁰⁴

The new trust Stalin placed in his generals, however, may have been lost by a second, unsuccessful attack made by the Red Army around the same time as 'Operation Uranus.' Zhukov planned and commanded another offensive, code named 'Operation Mars', which sent the Western and Kalinin Fronts to attack the German Ninth Army in the Rzhev-Sychevka region. If possible, the attack was to drive on and destroy all of Army Group Centre. Stiff German resistance repelled the attack and Soviet casualties mounted. The Red Army broke off the attack at roughly the same time that Paulus' army surrendered at Stalingrad.³⁰⁵

³⁰² Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 159.

³⁰³ Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, 208.

³⁰⁴ Conquest, *Stalin*, 255.

³⁰⁵ David M. Glantz, *Forgotten Battles of the Great Patriotic War*, World War II Magazine (Leesburg, Primedia, July/August, 2004), 37.

'Operation Mars' represented another unrealistic operational plan not dissimilar in scope from the disasters of early 1942. Instead of dwelling on the failure of 'Operation Mars,' however, Stalin basked in the victory at Stalingrad, seeing there the benefits of his cooperation with his generals and learning the lesson of practical military goals. After eighteen months Stalin had finally begun to work with the Red Army leadership in a constructive and effective way. In a service that had largely discouraged individual initiative before the war those mavericks that now spoke up to Stalin and explained military realities were rising to the top. Stalin's promotion of so many top officers following Stalingrad was a sign of his faith in their collective ability to achieve victory. By contrast, Hitler's promotion of Paulus just before the Sixth Army surrender was cynical and negative. Hitler had offered it simply to stiffen Paulus' resolve or to encourage his suicide.

When Stalin had undertaken the planning and overall operational command of the early 1942 offensives he failed miserably. Out of desperation he had turned to his military technicians who convinced him to adopt a general defensive posture. Though he was loath to step back from the attack he did and was able to conserve men and resources for the next great German attack. It was again during the darkest hours of the battle of Stalingrad when he agreed to listen to Zhukov and Vasilevsky. Their plan brought with it ultimate victory in the battle and changed significantly the balance of power between the Soviet Union and Germany.

Stalingrad was the turning point of the war in the East, the furthest German advance into the Soviet Union and the point from which total German victory became virtually impossible. It was also a turning point between Stalin and his generals as the

Soviet leader came to appreciate the necessity of working with his military technicians. Henceforward Stalin listened to his generals and truly appreciated their judgment. The days of simply pronouncing himself correct and ignoring their advice was over.

Kursk

The balance of the war shifted significantly after Stalingrad. The Germans were no longer in the position of strength that they had been in 1941 and 1942, while the Soviet Union's military and industrial power, with aid from the United States and Britain, continued to grow. After Stalingrad a total German military victory over the Soviet Union was no longer possible, though the Wehrmacht was still a lethal adversary that perhaps could inflict enough damage to force a negotiated peace.

Though Hitler was aware of the German Army's serious reverses and mounting danger from the Soviet Union, he refused to believe in anything other than total victory. What strategic insight this military amateur had shown in previous years had now abandoned him, his relationship with his military leadership continuing to decline. Conversely, Stalin and his senior generals had achieved a *modus operandi*. Though Stalin continued to exercise personal command of the Red Army, his political watchdogs had been called off. Victory had created a new trust and respect between the Soviet leader and the General Staff.

By this time Stalin was being briefed by an officer of the General Staff at least three times a day either in person or by telephone. These briefings usually were made by either Vasilevsky, the head of operations Aleksei Antonov, or his deputy Sergey Shtemenko. After the final briefing, usually late at night, the directives of the Stavka

would be created, Stalin referring to a military unit by the name of its commander. Such became the close working relationship of Stalin and his General Staff following the victory at Stalingrad.³⁰⁶

Early 1943 saw much ebb and flow on the Eastern Front. Kharkov was retaken by the Germans in March and the lines more or less stabilized by late spring. A large bulge appeared, protruding into the German lines centered on the Russian city of Kursk. Any casual glance at a military map early in the summer of 1943 showed the importance to both sides of the salient.

As always Stalin preferred to attack the German units massing before Kursk.

Zhukov later wrote,

The Supreme Commander himself was not yet certain whether it was better to counter the enemy with defensive operations or to deal a forestalling blow at him. Stalin was afraid that our defenses could not take the German forces' blow, as had been the case several times in 1941 and 1942. At the same time, he was not sure that our troops were in a position to defeat the enemy in offensive action.³⁰⁷

Stalin feared a repeat of the disasters of the previous two summers. Both the defensive victories at Moscow and Stalingrad had taken place in winter, giving the season an almost mystical quality to the Red Army. The prospect of warm weather and clear skies no doubt filled the Soviets with dread as this had traditionally been the weather of German victories. At the same time Stalin was reluctant to attack for the same reasons, the memories of early 1942 still fresh. Offense, however, had the advantage of giving the attacker the initiative, something Stalin had always valued greatly.

³⁰⁶ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 74-5.

³⁰⁷ David M. Humpert, *Swan Song of the Panzers*, *World War II Magazine* (Leesburg: Primedia, February, 2004), 56.

In the preparations for defense of Kursk Stalin listened carefully to his front commanders and valued their input. Zhukov favored strategic defense at Kursk in the hopes that the German Army would break upon Soviet defenses as a wave upon the rocks. Then, when the German offensive was spent, the Red Army could attack. Stalin polled his senior generals and found that most agreed with Zhukov. The May 1st Order of the Day called for the need to consolidate the gains of the previous winter. In short, attack in the immediate future was off the table.³⁰⁸

In preparing for the battle Stalin left nothing to chance and made good use of his military technicians. His Stavka representatives included Zhukov and Vasilevsky, proven military specialists. Gone were the days of dispatching political cronies like Voroshilov and Mekhlis to sensitive areas. The sector did indeed have political oversight in the form of Malenkov who had been dispatched as a representative of the GKO, but his authority did not extend to operational or command questions. His brief was to ensure supply and distribution of resources to military and civilian officials.³⁰⁹

The German attack began on July 5th from the north and the south of the salient. The Red Army had assembled 1.3 million men to meet it.³¹⁰ Prepared defenses and experienced commanders ensured that the attack made little headway after promising initial gains over the first few days. As the attack commenced, again Stalin inserted himself into the operational level of command. On July 6th he telephoned the commander of the 5th Guards Tank Army and ordered his unit advance in the direction of

³⁰⁸ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 156-9.

³⁰⁹ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 74.

³¹⁰ Humpert, *Swan Song of the Panzers*, 55.

Prokhorovka when Waffen-SS units appeared to be making headway.³¹¹ Stalin and Zhukov had many heated discussions over the telephone, the Soviet premier demanding local counterattacks and heaping scorn upon Zhukov for not acting quickly enough. Zhukov was able to calm Stalin and assure him of ultimate success despite the reproaches.³¹²

When the German attack petered out and Hitler recalled his forces the myth of the unstoppable German summer offensive was put to rest. The Soviets had withstood the worst the Nazis could muster. The Red Army launched its counterattack in the direction of Orel, north of Kursk and by August 4th it was in their hands. Kharkov was retaken on August 23 and Smolensk one month later.³¹³

The first great crisis since Stalingrad had been weathered successfully and once again the working relationship between Stalin and his military technicians had been at the heart of the victory. The battle of Kursk represented a realistic approach on behalf of Stalin and his military leadership to the situation. Operational objectives were not intended to throw the German Army out of Soviet territory altogether, as had the early 1942 offensives. Rather, the emphasis was placed on winning the battle by successfully defending the salient and launching counter-attacks to place the Red Army in advantageous positions for the next round of fighting.³¹⁴

For Hitler the decision to attack at Kursk was based on political as much as military factors. In mid-May Guderian, in his capacity as Inspector of Armored Forces,

³¹¹ Overy, *Russia's War*, 206-7.

³¹² Service, *Stalin*, 440.

³¹³ William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich* (New York: MJF Books, 1959), 1006.

³¹⁴ Glantz, *The Battle of Kursk*, 266.

met with Hitler in Berlin to discuss the forthcoming offensive. According to Guderian's account, when he asked why any offensive was planned in Russia at all that summer Hitler and Keitel replied that it was necessary for domestic morale as well as to reassure Germany's allies. Hitler also noted that it would act as a large-scale spoiling attack, ensuring no major Soviet offensives later in the year. Like the Red Army General Staff, the German General Staff had only modest operational goals for the offensive. 'Operation Citadel' was not intended to win the war, along the lines of previous summer campaigns in Russia. Guderian pressed the point, insisting such an attack, even successful, would make no appreciable difference to Germany's population or its allies. Hitler responded, "You're quite right. Whenever I think of this attack my stomach turns over."³¹⁵

The date for 'Operation Citadel' was pushed back repeatedly from early May to early July. This was to allow the deployment of heavier German panzers coming off the production line, though perhaps also reflected Hitler's growing nervousness regarding the operation. Whatever the reason, it allowed the Soviets more time to prepare and increase their manpower. Differences in opinion pervaded at OKH. Guderian called for delays to ensure a greater quality and quantity of panzers for the battle. Manstein, tasked with commanding the operation, and his subordinate Kluge both insisted that the attack launch at the earliest possible moment to preclude any further Red Army preparations. Hitler ultimately decided to launch the attack on July 5th, believing enough new tanks were available. Jodl instructed the military propaganda office to give the impression that the

³¹⁵ Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 308-9; Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, 269.

Kursk attack was only a limited operation, fearing comparison with the much larger operations of the previous two years.³¹⁶

Indeed Jodl argued that a local success was all that could be expected from the operation, fueling further Hitler's doubts. Nor was OKH enthusiastic about the plan. Zeitzler and many army commanders attempted to dissuade Hitler from the adventure. Both Manstein and Kluge believed in the operation with its massive pincer movement over a battlefield the size of Wales.³¹⁷

The repeated delays of the operation are commented upon by Goebbels in a May 7th diary entry, intimating that perhaps a Soviet attack was forthcoming,

In the East the Führer will soon start a limited offensive in the direction of Kursk. He may, however, delay it to see whether the Bolsheviks want to beat us to it. That might offer us an even more favorable chance than if we took the initiative. Be that as it may, we are prepared in every way. There are arms and soldiers aplenty, so that we need not worry very much.³¹⁸

Hitler's vacillation may have had to do with his belief that the Red Army would attack the Wehrmacht first, placing the advantages of defense with the Germans. In any case Goebbels' entry notes the smaller scale of the military objectives.

Hitler announced his decision for the attack date on July 1st from his headquarters in East Prussia. He stated his fears regarding security for the operation, "This time we must be absolutely sure that nothing of our intentions is betrayed again either through carelessness or neglect."³¹⁹ Despite the tension pervading the air at Hitler's headquarters

³¹⁶ Mosier, *Cross of Iron*, 200; Glantz, *The Battle of Kursk*, 55.

³¹⁷ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 180-1; Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 510.

³¹⁸ Goebbels, *Diaries, 1942-1943*, 352.

³¹⁹ Humpert, *Swan Song of the Panzers*, 54.

and in the battlefield, morale among the troops was high.³²⁰ They were no doubt thinking what their opposite numbers were thinking: The Wehrmacht had never been beaten in a summer campaign.

The heavy German Tiger tanks, a small number in the overall German panzer formations, proved more deadly than the Soviet T-34s, but significantly less maneuverable. The Tigers were often surrounded and pummeled. The July 12th heavy fighting around Prokhorovka, where General Hoth's SS divisions were halted by the 5th Guards Tank Army, included point-blank engagements which negated German advantages in armor and gunnery.³²¹

On July 13th Hitler summoned Manstein and Kluge to his headquarters in East Prussia where he announced that 'Operation Citadel' was to be called off. The Führer cited the landing in Sicily of Allied troops and the need for strong German formations to stiffen the resolve of the unreliable Italians. The only formations capable of dealing with the crisis were those already engaged at Kursk. Manstein argued vainly for a continuation of the battle, not wishing to give the Red Army any time to regroup and rally. Hitler was adamant and demanded that all units return to their positions of July 5th.³²²

Kluge argued against the move as well. When Hitler informed Kluge that he would have to transfer some of his SS divisions to Manstein to make up for the units transferred to Italy, Kluge warned of disaster. He told Hitler that the loss of the divisions

³²⁰ Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles*, 219.

³²¹ Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 510-1.

³²² Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 448-9.

left the German position in Orel untenable. Hitler responded, “Even so, Herr Feldmarshall: we are not master here of our own decisions.”³²³

It is doubtful that even had the operation been allowed to continue it would have succeeded. The Red Army had been given plenty of time to prepare its defenses, and had superior numbers on their side from the beginning. The Soviets had a 2 to 1 advantage over the Germans in manpower, not mention significantly more tanks, planes, and heavy guns.³²⁴ The Soviets proved tenacious defenders of the Kursk salient and, though fears of the German summer offensive myth were real, unit commanders didn’t make confused radio calls asking for instructions as they had the past two summers.³²⁵ The defenders of Kursk were now veteran fighters. They were led by a system of astute military technicians and a General Staff becoming much more capable than its German counterpart.³²⁶

Unlike Stalin, Hitler dealt with a second war in the West. While OKH and field commanders in the East correctly began to see Russia as the decisive theatre of the war, Hitler, along with Jodl and OKW, placed as much emphasis on fighting the Western Allies. This is illustrated by Hitler’s willingness to abandon a campaign against the Red Army, mid-engagement. It is illustrated again two years later when, with the Red Army on the eastern frontiers of Germany, Hitler ordered a major attack against the British and American Armies in Belgium.

³²³ Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 597.

³²⁴ Winchester, *Hitler’s War on Russia*, 158.

³²⁵ Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 510.

³²⁶ Robert M. Citino, *The German Way of War, From Thirty Years War to the Third Reich* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 269.

The resources of the Third Reich were limited and shrinking, while those of the Allies were growing. If Kursk had been even a limited success perhaps Hitler would have seriously sought peace negotiations with Stalin. Such a victory would have given Hitler the illusion of negotiating from a position of strength. In any case the attack was called off ostensibly to support the war effort in Italy. This reflects the growing divide in operational thinking between OKH and OKW and Hitler's failure to make painful strategic decisions. Hitler wanted to save Southern Italy from Allied invasion, thus ensuring continued alliance with Italy. By mid-1943, however, settling accounts with Russia had become much more important than saving Italy.

Those closest to Hitler, his military and political advisors, attempted to goad him into appointing a new Commander-in-Chief of the Army not long after the battle. Guderian, Zeitzler, and Albert Speer believed that a new army leader, unburdened by the increasingly erratic decisions of Hitler, could make a real difference in the war in the East.³²⁷ The generals believed that Keitel and Jodl at OKW did not speak for the army as an institution to Hitler. The army, they feared, was being treated as a second-class organization as Hitler heaped favor and resources upon OKW, the SS, the Party, and other agencies permeating the Third Reich. The result of having no lobbyist at headquarters with sufficient clout to represent the army was contributing to the worsening situation in Russia. Both Kluge and Manstein had already broached the subject with the

³²⁷ Hart, *Guderian*, 93.

Führer. Despite the pleas of his most capable generals, Hitler refused to relinquish direct command of the army.³²⁸

The strategic disaster suffered by the Germans at Stalingrad was completed at Kursk. The battle represented the last great German offensive on the Eastern Front in the war and the permanent surrender of the strategic initiative to the Red Army. By late July Goebbels was lamenting Stalin's order of the day to the Red Army in which the Soviet leader claimed that the German offensive had been a failure and that the Red Army, not the German Army, had gained ground. Goebbels wrote, "I suppose we can't possibly change the situation by offensive operations as has been the case the past two summers."³²⁹

Following the Kursk campaign Hitler pulled further and further away from concepts of what was possible and what was not possible. Unlike Stalin, who had learned to let his military technicians do their job with only minimal interference, Hitler continued to view himself as indispensable to the operational realm of the war. His unwillingness to give up direct command of the army and his continued interference in operations ensured further problems for the OKH and the German army engaged in the colossal battlefield of Russia.

³²⁸ Dan van der Vat, *The Good Nazi, The Life and Lies of Albert Speer* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1997), 159.

³²⁹ Goebbels, *Diaries, 1942-1943*, 405.

CHAPTER 6

DOWNFALL AND TRIUMPH

Bagration and July 20th

June of 1944 saw the Red Army stronger than it had ever been at any time since the German invasion. Three years to the day that Germany launched 'Operation Barbarossa' the Red Army tore the heart out of Germany's Army Group Centre with its own massive operation. The blow placed Russian troops just to the east of Warsaw and ensured the final Soviet victory a year later. Success resulted from veteran troops and commanders led by an efficient military command system in which Stalin and his generals worked together in confidence.

For Germany, with the Wehrmacht virtually expelled from Soviet soil, the defeat was an unmitigated disaster. The Red Army success was the result of many factors; occurring only weeks after the Western Allies had successfully landed in France, and opened up a two-front land war against the Reich. The division of Germany's military strength as well as the continued schism between OKW and OKH played important parts, as did faulty intelligence and Hitler's overconfidence. The friction between the Führer and his generals would come to a head at this time as well when the military plot to murder Hitler failed miserably. The abortive attempt on Hitler's life would have

profound consequences for the German Army, its relationship with Hitler, and for Germany itself.

By the spring of 1944 Stalin was no longer a frightened, erratic figure throwing men and material to the wolves in a desperate attempt to stave off the invader. He had learned the arts of patience, cooperation with his generals, and the setting of realistic operational goals. The Second and Third Ukrainian Fronts were engaged with a reconstituted German Sixth Army in Romania, ultimately achieving victory in September. The Balkan adventure was a sideshow compared to the massive operation Stavka was planning to drive the Germans out of Byelorussia once and for all.³³⁰ In preparation for the major offensive against the German Army that summer Stavka ordered front commanders to submit their ideas. Stalin himself had long telephone discussions with the officers after reading their recommendations. He badgered them with questions, wishing to learn every detail of the terrain, the men, and probable enemy responses. He paid particular attention to General Rokossovsky and his 1st Belorussian Front. The General Staff began an exhaustive study of the entire front. By April Stalin wished to go onto the immediate attack and rejected a Stavka recommendation to go onto the general defensive. Soon after he relented and agreed that the North-Western and Western Fronts should consolidate and prepare for an eventual offensive. To ensure that his troops remained in a state of readiness, and perhaps to impose his preference on the

³³⁰ Pat McTaggart, *Red Storm Over Romania*, World War II Magazine (Leesburg: Primedia, March, 2001), 46-7; David M. Glantz, *Red Storm Over the Balkans, The Failed Soviet Invasion of Romania, Spring, 1944* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2007), 381.

Stavka, Stalin ordered that the directives to go on the defensive should be considered “preparatory moves for an offensive.”³³¹

‘Operation Bagration’ was named for Georgian General Pyotr Bagration, the hero of the Napoleonic Wars who died from wounds suffered at the battle of Borodino.³³² The allusion to Russia’s military past was not new to this offensive. Since the earliest days of the German invasion Stalin co-opted Russia’s traditional heroes in the quest to rally the Soviet peoples against the enemy. In those frantic first months of the war Stalin invoked these figures in speeches. Lenin and the Revolution often took a backseat to such notables as past military leaders Alexander Nevsky, Dmitri Donskoi, Aleksandr Suvorov and Mikhail Kutuzov. Stalin remarked in one speech, “Let the manly images of our great ancestors... inspire you in this war!”³³³

Indeed, in the uncertain days of October, 1941, as Stalin was debating evacuating the capital for the relative peace of Kuibyshev, he read a biography of the hero of 1812, Kutuzov.³³⁴ Figures such as Kutuzov and Suvorov had been officially recognized as liberators of the Russian people from the tyranny of the Napoleonic French since the mid-1930s, but with the German invasion these figures took on a whole new propaganda importance.³³⁵ While perhaps many Soviet citizens had little regard for ideology or Revolutionary intellectualism, most could identify with Russia’s past military glories and the parallels, particularly of the Napoleonic invasions, with the current war. The naming

³³¹ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 190.

³³² Merridale, *Ivan's War*, 263.

³³³ Andrew Nagorski, *The Greatest Battle: Stalin, Hitler and the Desperate Struggle for Moscow that Changed the Course of World War II* (New York: Simon & Schuster Paperbacks, 2007), 221-4.

³³⁴ *Ibid.*, 181-2.

³³⁵ Serivce, *Stalin*, 325.

of the great 1944 Soviet offensive 'Bagration' was another way in which the Soviet Union sought to mobilize the masses to defeat Germany.

The use of history for propaganda was hardly confined the Soviets. Since the beginning of the war Germany trumpeted its own past military achievements as proof of German military strength. Hitler often held up Frederick the Great as the epitome of German heroism. With a possible dig at his own generals Hitler remarked, "Prussia owes its rise to the heroism of one man. Even there the closest advisers were disposed to capitulation. Everything depended on Frederick the Great."³³⁶ As the war began to go badly for the Third Reich, German propaganda offered parallels between the current position and that of Prussia during the Seven Years' War. The idea that providence had saved Frederick the Great then was rehashed to assure the German people that providence would not abandon Hitler.³³⁷

Indeed, so important was invoking Germany's military past that in late 1944 187,000 soldiers were taken from the front lines in order to participate as extras in the film *Kolberg*, an exorbitantly expensive propaganda piece that recreated the Pomeranian town's resistance to Napoleon's forces in 1807.³³⁸

On May 22-3rd Stavka held a major conference to coordinate and prepare for the operation. Attendees included Zhukov and Vasilevsky who were to act as Stavka coordinators for the offensive, the front commanders including Rokossovsky and Hovhannes Bagramyan, as well as other top level military personal representing the air force, artillery, signals, rear services, and engineers. In submitting his plan for engaging

³³⁶ Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 277.

³³⁷ H. R. Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler* (New York: The Macmillan Company, 1947), 49-50.

³³⁸ Burleigh, *The Third Reich*, 788.

German positions around Bobruisk, Rokossovsky included an attack from two directions, meant to envelope and destroy the enemy. Stalin disagreed with this notion, believing a single, powerful blow against the position would be the better tactic. He cited previous operational triumphs in which a single blow led to victory. Rokossovsky was not deterred and continued to call for the double attack, even after being warned by political cronies Molotov and Malenkov who asked of the general, "Do you know who you are arguing with?" Rokossovsky flatly told Stalin that if a single attack was insisted upon, he would ask to be relieved of his command. Stalin, convinced by Rokossovsky's faith in his plan, yielded and allowed the double attack to go forward, stating that he liked generals who knew what they wanted to accomplish.³³⁹

A similar disagreement broke out between Stalin and 1st Ukrainian Front commander Marshal Konev during the planning of the Lvov-Sandomierz offensive. This operation, with the aim of pushing the German Army out of the Western Ukraine and South-Eastern Poland, was intended to compliment 'Operation Bagration' taking place to its north. Again, Stalin relented and said to Konev, "You are a very stubborn fellow. Very well, go ahead with your plan and put it into operation on your own responsibility." At the same time, General Meretskov's Karelian Front was to attack German and Finnish forces near Leningrad. After scolding him in front of the Stavka, Stalin reluctantly agreed to reinforce Meretskov's troops with an additional rifle corps, despite objections from Zhukov and Vasilevsky.³⁴⁰ Stalin's appreciation for the judgment of front commanders had grown considerably since the dark days of 1941, and the Soviet leader

³³⁹ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 202-3.

³⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 207, 328.

began the 1944 operations with concessions to their wishes, sometimes contrary to those of the General Staff.

The influence of the political cronies in military affairs was visibly on the wane by this point. When during the lead up to the operation Mekhlis denounced General Ivan Petrov, commander of the 2nd Byelorussian Front, Stalin listened and fired the general. Within weeks however Petrov had been placed in command of the 4th Ukrainian Front.³⁴¹ The apparatchiks still had important roles to fill within the Soviet Union, and perhaps they were still to be humored when offering suggestions in the military field. Stalin knew who he had to thank for the victories at Stalingrad, Kursk, and countless smaller operations since, however, and it wasn't his political cronies.

The four fronts which made up the primary assault force for 'Operation Bagration' were the 1st, 2nd, and 3rd Byelorussian and the 1st Ukrainian, representing a considerable show of strength for the Red Army. Altogether this force contained nearly two and half million men, twice as many troops as their German opponents. The force also had significant advantages in the number tanks, planes and artillery pieces.³⁴² The Stavka intended this operation to be a hammer blow across the line, not a series of pinpricks designed to wrest away control of strategic points.

A few days before the offensive began Soviet partisans began attacking transportation hubs and railway lines. Air attacks followed on the night of June 21-22nd and the ground assault began the following day. Rokossovsky began his phase of the offensive on the 23rd and, after a few confused movements, assaulted Bobruisk from two

³⁴¹ Ibid., 199.

³⁴² Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 199.

directions on the 26th. On July 2-3rd Minsk, the first capital city of a Soviet republic to fall to the Germans, was recaptured. In Lithuania, Vilnius fell on July 13th. By early August elements of the 47th Army were just east of Warsaw, prompting Polish nationalists to rise against their German occupiers in one of the war's great tragedies.³⁴³

Heavy casualties and severe losses in planes, tanks, and guns meant that the Red Army offensive petered out after making significant gains and reaching northern and central Poland. Nearly 700,000 Soviet troops were killed, wounded, or went missing. Still, in conjunction with supporting maneuvers like Konev's Lvov-Sandomierz operation, 'Operation Bagration' had destroyed over thirty German divisions and placed the Red Army, albeit an over-extended Red Army, on the Vistula River.³⁴⁴ Additionally, Soviet combat experience was giving the Red Army an edge. When the Germans had invaded in 1941, the ratio of Soviet tanks destroyed to German was about 6 to 1. By mid-late 1944 the losses in tanks were even.³⁴⁵

Stalin was generally in a good mood during the offensive, realizing his advantages and plainly expecting victory. He remained in contact with his commanders and Stavka coordinators during the offensive and consulted with Zhukov about the practicality of moving into Poland before he issued orders to drive toward Warsaw.³⁴⁶ Supreme military decisions continued to rest with Stalin, but during 'Operation Bagration' his trust in the Stavka and fighting officers led him to spend more time on

³⁴³ Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 204, 207-9, 213.

³⁴⁴ Ibid., 214-5.

³⁴⁵ Overy, *Russia's War*, 191.

³⁴⁶ Ibid., 243-4.

non-operational dimensions of the offensive such as improving morale and supply.³⁴⁷ In early June Stalin intervened in a dispute between the General Staff and the head of the railways and rear services. Vasilevsky charged that the fronts were not ready because supplies had not been arriving fast enough. Stalin put pressure upon the railway and supply administrations and soon the matter was resolved.³⁴⁸

‘Operation Bagration’ demonstrated again the close working relationship between Stalin and his generals. Though he occasionally argued with them, like the exchanges over the double-attacks with Rokossovsky and Konev, or even berating them, like when Meretskov requested reinforcements, Stalin ultimately appreciated the judgment of the commander on the ground. Additionally Stalin left the higher planning largely to the General Staff and Stavka, backing them up when necessary against the Soviet bureaucracy and his own political cronies.

Stavka ‘representatives’ were now referred to as ‘coordinators,’ denoting their role not in dictating policy to front commanders, but synchronizing it with them. The synchronicity of the Red Army and civilian war agencies played a big role in Soviet success in the later stages of the war and this is due largely to Stalin’s willingness to delegate, rather than micromanage. Even as Hitler still insisted on maintaining direct control over the German Army and directing even tactical movements to his troops, Stalin was content to be a major player in general war direction, but leave details to his military technicians. Though he still occasionally issued operational orders, this became more and more rare. Stalin was the Supreme Commander, and although he would later

³⁴⁷ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 203.

³⁴⁸ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 208, 211.

take on the role of Stavka coordinator himself, he had no illusions about being a field commander.

For the German Army the Soviet offensives were a disaster greater than the loss of Stalingrad a year and a half earlier. The Wehrmacht lost 350,000 troops and 31 generals to the Red Army.³⁴⁹ Though Soviet losses were considerably higher, the Germans simply could not replace the men and equipment. Just as Soviet power began to grow in military prowess and war-making potential, German abilities were significantly shrinking.

Army Group Centre was commanded by Field Marshal Ernst Busch at the time of the Red Army attack. Busch's appointment owed more to his unswerving loyalty to Hitler than to his military abilities. Yet even his faith in the Führer counted for little when he requested a shortening of his line. Hitler, still very much involved in all operational questions, denied the request. Eventually he blamed Busch for the dire military setbacks and along with General Hans Jordan, commander of the Ninth Army, he was relieved of his post. Busch was replaced by Field Marshal Walter Model, another officer whose military aptitude was overshadowed by his perceived political orthodoxy.³⁵⁰

By 1944 Hitler had completely abandoned realistic strategic objectives and increasingly relied upon wishful thinking and fanciful goals. On January 4th Manstein asked permission for elements of Army Group South to retreat from their positions along the Dnieper. Hitler forbade the move with fantastic reasoning, "There are so many

³⁴⁹ Jonathan W. Jordan, *The Wehrmacht's Worst Defeat*, World War II Magazine (Leesburg: Weider History Group, July/August, 2006), 43.

³⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 36-42.

disagreements on the enemy side that the coalition is bound to fall apart one day.”³⁵¹

Hitler’s strategic objective was now to hold out until the alliance between the Soviet Union and the Western Allies fell apart. While certainly the two camps diverged following the Second World War into the superpower blocs of the Cold War, what Hitler failed to realize was that their mutual hatred for Nazi Germany was greater than their differences. As long as Hitler ruled Germany there could be no split in the Allied coalition.

This was one delusion among many, however. In arguments with Zeitzler over the fate of the Crimea Hitler said, “Just wait and see. We’ve lived through a couple of those cases when everyone said that things were beyond repair. Later it always turned out that things could be brought under control after all.”³⁵² As late as June 6th, Hitler told Goebbels that Britain was as good as finished and only awaited Germany’s final blow before collapsing altogether.³⁵³

Rifts at the Führer’s headquarters continued to widen. Zeitzler requested to resign when Hitler fired two of his most capable Field Marshals, Manstein and von Kleist, in March.³⁵⁴ The breach between the army leadership and OKW also continued with Zeitzler and his staff refusing to remain in conferences as OKW officers gave their reports to Hitler. Finally, after nearly two years in the position, Zeitzler insisted he was

³⁵¹ Berthon, *The Warlords*, 228.

³⁵² Mellenthin, *Panzer Battles*, 272.

³⁵³ Berthon, *Warlords*, 240.

³⁵⁴ Manstein, *Lost Victories*, 544.

too ill to continue. Hitler accepted the resignation of his Chief of Staff in early July, by which time the two men had grown thoroughly disgusted with one another.³⁵⁵

Lacking the 'intellectual brilliance' of his predecessors and appointed on the eve of the worst military disaster the German Army had known up to that point, Zeitzler found himself in the position of a fireman fighting as much for his generals against Hitler as against the Russian enemy.³⁵⁶ Suffering from a breakdown after his dismissal, Zeitzler would later be humiliated by Hitler when the Führer ordered his expulsion from the army and loss of the right to wear a uniform or draw a pension.³⁵⁷

The double blow of 'Operation Bagration' and the Allied landing in Normandy highlighted the growing contempt between Hitler and many of his officers. Officers continued to press for a reorganization of command in the eastern theater, which Hitler rejected.³⁵⁸ Rundstedt, now Commander-in-Chief in the West, was beside himself with rage when he called to inform the Führer that the Allied invasion was underway and told that Hitler was sleeping and not to be roused under any circumstances.³⁵⁹ As Hitler held ultimate command over panzer forces in France this severely hampered the German Army's ability to respond to the invasion. The following year, when Soviet tanks were rolling through the streets of Berlin, Zhukov had no trouble rousing Stalin to inform him of events unfolding in Germany.³⁶⁰ The Soviet situation in May of 1945 was nowhere near as precarious as that of Germany in 1944.

³⁵⁵ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 452-3.

³⁵⁶ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 277.

³⁵⁷ Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 649-50.

³⁵⁸ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 452-3.

³⁵⁹ Toland, *Adolf Hitler*, 785.

³⁶⁰ Overy, *Russia's War*, 275.

The military conspiracy against Hitler, which had existed in various forms for years, came to a head on July 20th when Colonel Clause von Stauffenberg planted a bomb in the Führer's East Prussian headquarters and attempted to oust the Nazi regime. The explosion killed several officers and wounded a few more, but Hitler walked away with only slight injuries. In the wake of the bomb and the failed coup, Hitler's disdain for the officer corps reached new heights and ensured the total subservience of the German Army to the Nazi Party for the remainder of the Third Reich.

Stauffenberg, like many army officers, rejoiced at Hitler's accession to the Chancellorship in 1933.³⁶¹ After years of war and rumors spread of atrocities in the East, however, his enthusiasm for the Nazi regime waned. Stauffenberg began to believe that Hitler's direction of the war was "foolish and criminal," and that he had to be stopped before he dragged Germany into an abyss.³⁶² In these sentiments Stauffenberg was not alone and the conspiracy counted among its numbers former Chief of the General Staff Ludwig Beck, second in command of military intelligence Colonel Hans Oster, and General of Infantry Friedrich Olbricht, to name but a few.

Leading officers like Stauffenberg were quickly shot while other members of the conspiracy, both military and civilian, were tried by the notorious Nazi People's Court under the contemptible direction of Judge Roland Freisler. Hitler seized the chance to pull the army yet closer to him in an attempt to stamp out lingering conservative sentiment. From this point forward the German Army was to be a National Socialist

³⁶¹ Gellately, *Lenin, Stalin, and Hitler*, 290.

³⁶² Peter Hoffman, *Stauffenberg, A Family History, 1905-1944* (Montreal: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2003), 151.

organ more than a mere institution of the state. Goebbels noted in his diary entry of July 23rd,

The Führer is furious with the generals, especially those from the General Staff.... He is determined to make a bloody example of them, and root out a freemason's lodge which has always been ill-disposed to us and was only waiting for the moment when in the Reich's critical hour it could stab us in the back.³⁶³

Goebbels' reference to the stab in the back is telling. For the Nazi mentality the July 20th plot was analogous to the various forces that conspired to rob Germany of its victory in World War I. The reference to the freemason's lodge implied that the current conspiracy had the same internationalist bent as that earlier conspiracy. The difference this time was that the German officer corps lay at the heart of this imagined worldwide plot to rob Nazi Germany of victory.

Heinz Guderian, who was conveniently incommunicado as the events of July 20th played out, was selected as Chief of the General Staff. His appointment owed as much to chance as it did to his apparent political suitability. Hitler's intention was to appoint General Buhle to replace Zeitzler as Chief of the General Staff, but Buhle had been severely wounded in the July 20th bomb. Guderian was therefore the closest officer at hand with essential experience on the Russian front and who also had no direct connection to Stauffenberg's plot. Even as Hitler railed against the General Staff as a hotbed of mutiny, he promoted this 'reliable' officer to be its chief.³⁶⁴

Acutally Hitler appointed Guderian to be its temporary chief. The official title Guderian held was now Acting Chief of the General Staff. Perhaps Hitler didn't trust

³⁶³ Berthon, *The Warlords*, 250.

³⁶⁴ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 475-6.

Guderian as fully as he let others believe, or perhaps this was another way that Hitler attempted to accrue more military authority for himself without actually appointing himself Chief of the General Staff.³⁶⁵ In fact, Guderian was appointed Acting Chief of the General Staff even as he maintained his office of Inspector of Panzer Forces.³⁶⁶ Perhaps the Führer had so little faith in the office of Chief of the General Staff that he felt Guderian could handle both with little difficulty.

At any rate, in the aftermath of the bomb plot Guderian was expected to put the best National Socialist face on his office. In fact Guderian himself was expected to be a National Socialist Leadership Officer writ large in the German military. At the time of his appointment he stated, “There is no future of the realm without National Socialism,” (“Es gibt keine Zukunft des Reiches ohne den Nationalsozialismus.”)³⁶⁷ Guderian, along with Rundstedt, served on the court of inquiry that expelled those involved in the bomb plot from the army. Additionally, Guderian required that the traditional military salute used by the army be replaced with the party salute and stated that all officers must be National Socialists.³⁶⁸

With Guderian’s ascension we see the complete fall of an army independent of politics. Guderian, who had always promoted himself as a pro-Hitler officer, now hammered the point home. Was this an attempt to deflect suspicion over his role in the bomb plot? Or was his new drive to Nazify the army a legitimate belief that only a

³⁶⁵ Hart, *Guderian*, 102.

³⁶⁶ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 203.

³⁶⁷ Rolf-Dieter Müller & Hans-Erich Volkman, *Die Wehrmacht, Mythos und Realität* (Munich: R. Oldenbourg Verlag GmbH, 1999), 224.

³⁶⁸ Hart, *Guderian*, 105.

fanatical devotion to the Führer could save Germany. A combination of both seems the most likely answer.

Hitler's anger at his generals prompted him to remark that he now understood Stalin's reasons for having Tukhachevsky shot. Military justice was often suspended in favor of improvised tribunals run by a hodgepodge of Gestapo, SD, and military policemen. Political figures like Martin Bormann and Heinrich Himmler were invited to attend Hitler's military conferences daily.³⁶⁹ In fact Himmler was elevated to many new military roles including command of the Replacement Army. Under his command the SS would dominate over a quarter of the German Army.³⁷⁰

Himmler's hatred for the officer corps was exceeded only by Hitler's. The *Reichsführer-SS* saw in the aftermath of July 20th the opportunity to recreate the German Army into a National Socialist 'People's Army,' the very thing Röhm had wished for the SA ten years earlier. To this end Himmler was determined to destroy the power and prestige of the officer corps.³⁷¹ In this he was aided by German public opinion and even the lower ranks of the army. For most Germans the thought of generals turning against the Führer in the critical hour was shocking to say the least.³⁷² Guderian later wrote,

Only one fact seems beyond dispute: at that time the great proportion of German people still believed in Adolf Hitler and would have been convinced that with his death the assassin had removed the only man who might still have been able to bring the war to a favorable conclusion. The odium thus created by his death would have been attached primarily to the corps of officers, the generals and the general staff...³⁷³

³⁶⁹ Winchester, *Hitler's War on Russia*, 186.

³⁷⁰ Mawdsley, *Thunder in the East*, 205.

³⁷¹ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 398.

³⁷² Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of the Third Reich*, 1082.

³⁷³ Guderian, *Panzer Leader*, 349.

A German military victory in 1944 was not possible. The battle of Kursk the previous year had robbed the Wehrmacht of the strategic initiative in the war against the Soviet Union and it was never to return. Hitler's great hope was that in wearing down both the Red Army and the forces of Britain and the United States he could create an animosity between them and exploit it. As stated above, this was wishful thinking. Hitler's Reich was the glue that held the Allies together.

Those officers that were aware of Hitler's unrealistic strategic goals decided to act. The result was the fiasco of July 20th. In the attempted assassination and failed coup, Hitler saw the confirmation of all of his doubts, suspicions, and frustrations toward his army leadership that he had nursed for years. The continued loyalty of officers like Keitel and Jodl ensured the position of the OKW command, though it too had its traitors. For Hitler the army was the chief culprit. It was the same army whose leadership had warned him against adventures in Rhineland, Austria, and Czechoslovakia in the mid-thirties. It was the same army leadership that counseled against attacking Poland and France. It was the same army leadership that failed to take Moscow and then lost an army at Stalingrad. It was the same army leadership that had been scheming to take away his command of the Eastern Front for over a year. Now that same army leadership stepped out of the shadows and revealed its true face. It was a nest of traitors.

It was impossible for Hitler to accept responsibility for the military defeats in both Russia and France just as it had been impossible for him to believe that Germany had militarily lost the First World War. Sinister forces were working to sabotage Germany's war effort just as they had in 1918. The July 20th plot gave Hitler another scapegoat. The result was increased Nazification of the army. Greater control of military decisions by

political organizations like the SS and the Party ensured decreased power and influence of the officer corps. The General Staff was placed under a general with solid and vocal Nazi credentials and the continuing split between OKW and OKH only further diminished the German Army as an institution.

As Stalin was increasingly ignoring political attack dogs like Mekhlis, Hitler was relying more and more upon cronies like Bormann and Himmler. Stalin was supporting his officers in their requests and consulting with them on operational and strategic questions. Hitler was beginning the process of murdering officers associated with the bomb plot and continued to micromanage the war. As the conflict entered its final year Stalin and his military leadership set realistic operational goals within the framework of a long-term strategy. Hitler had no strategy and simply hoped for an improbable political victory that would settle the war. For this reason his military leadership held him in justifiable contempt.

In the military realm Stalin had learned a degree of humility while Hitler's hubris knew no bounds.

The Drive to Berlin

In early November, 1944, the Stavka decided that the drive from Warsaw to Berlin would constitute the Red Army's primary axis of advance for the coming offensive, scheduled to begin sometime in mid-January. Marshal Zhukov had been placed in command of the 1st Byelorussian Front which would be the principal unit in the assault. In contrast to Bagration, there was no central planning meeting with all of the

front commanders. Rather, the officers met independently with Stalin and the General Staff to give input and receive orders.³⁷⁴

A profound shift in the military relationship between the Stavka and the front occurred at this time. Zhukov, who had served in a variety of positions throughout the war and wielded military authority second to Stalin's own, was given command of the front tasked with taking the German capital. This no doubt reflected Stalin's faith in Zhukov's ability to get the job done, but also perhaps to reward the military technician who had saved Moscow and Stalingrad, and handed the Red Army many other victories.

The capture of Berlin, however, was not only going to be the triumph of any front commander, however exalted he may be. Stalin decided that the ultimate victory over Hitler's Reich, symbolized by the fall of its capital, would be his victory as well. To that end the operation would be commanded by the Stavka directly. The front commanders were to maintain constant communication with the Kremlin and Stalin, now inserting himself into the role of Stavka coordinator for the offensive, was in operational command.³⁷⁵

Stalin became effectively the supreme field commander for the drive on Berlin. This decision, however, was not taken arbitrarily. Relying as always on the judgment of Zhukov, Stalin consulted the marshal by phone and asked whether this new arrangement was feasible. Zhukov pointed out that the Red Army's shorter line overall made this the command relationship practical.³⁷⁶ Zhukov's reasoning made sense from a military standpoint as previous Stavka coordinators had to walk a balancing act between the needs

³⁷⁴ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 449.

³⁷⁵ Overy, *Russia's War*, 255; Geoffrey Jukes, *Vasilevsky (From Stalin's Generals)*, 284.

³⁷⁶ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 426.

of the various fronts and the orders of Stavka. Now that the Red Army was projecting itself into the narrower corridor of Central Europe, this was no longer necessary. Perhaps Zhukov also realized the value, indeed the necessity, of Stalin's participation in the final campaign of the war. For political and propaganda purposes, Stalin's conspicuous leadership in the final defeat of Hitlerism was a must.

Stalin's decision to take on the role of Stavka coordinator was a political move much more than a military one. Stalin had to be seen to be in overall command of the final act of the war, but aside from major operational decisions his military technicians maintained their authority.³⁷⁷ In his new position as Stavka coordinator Stalin refrained from the operational micromanagement that characterized Hitler's command style. Vasilevsky, the capable Chief of the General Staff who had been an integral part of planning so many Red Army triumphs, was initially shuffled off to the side as Stavka coordinator for the 1st and 2nd Baltic Fronts. When the commander of the 3rd Byelorussian Front, General Chernyakhovskii was killed in action, Stalin appointed Vasilevsky to take his place.³⁷⁸ The role of Chief of the General Staff fell to Aleksei Antonov, with S. M. Shtemenko as his Chief of Operations. These two officers worked closely with Stalin during the drive to Berlin and ensured close coordination between the General Staff and the operation as it unfolded.³⁷⁹

Stalin also intervened directly, with negative consequences, in the assault on Budapest. On November 3rd the commander of the 2nd Ukrainian Front, General R. Malinovsky, requested more time to prepare his forces and bring up reserves before

³⁷⁷ Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 288.

³⁷⁸ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 428-9.

³⁷⁹ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 256.

attacking the city. Stalin responded coldly, “You do not understand the political necessity of mounting an immediate attack on Budapest.... I categorically order you to go over the offensive tomorrow.” Malinovsky attacked on November 4th but failed to make headway. Another assault on the 11th also ended with little favorable result.³⁸⁰ The city only fell to the Red Army after weeks of intense fighting and was the scene of many atrocities against civilians. The levels rape and pillage in Budapest were unprecedented by the Red Army and foreshadowed events to come after the fall of German capital.³⁸¹

Stalin’s pressuring of Malinovsky appears to be a throwback to his earlier habit of insisting on an offensive regardless of unit readiness and realistic goals, like his badgering of Meretskov before Leningrad in early 1942. Despite Stalin’s insistence on the political reasons for the attack, however, the assault upon Budapest had important military implications. Budapest was a secondary objective that Hitler was evidently bound to defend ruthlessly. The continued pressure on Budapest ensured that German units were not transferred further north to defend the approaches to Berlin, the primary objective. Stalin was acting perfectly in his role as Stavka coordinator. The failure to take Budapest in a timely manner still grated upon Stalin, however, and he rarely mentioned the action later.³⁸²

Over two million men were assembled for the assault into Germany, nearly ten thousand aircraft. This represented an incredible Red Army advantage in terms of numbers, with eleven times as many soldiers as their German adversaries and several

³⁸⁰ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 396-7.

³⁸¹ Merridale, *Ivan’s War*, 305.

³⁸² Erickson, *Malinovsky (From Stalin’s Generals)*, 121.

more factors of tanks and artillery guns.³⁸³ February and March saw the Red Army sweep across East Prussia and Central Poland, virtually destroying German Army Group A and Army Group Centre, and delivering crushing blows on its flanks to Army Group Vistula and Army Group South. Over four hundred miles had been crossed, bringing the Red Army to within forty miles of Berlin.³⁸⁴

The Stavka began planning the *coup de grâce* against Berlin on April 1st, just as Zhukov and Rokossovsky were finishing their operations in Pomerania and Konev was clearing Upper Silesia. The failures of the Russian approach to Berlin in the Seven Years' War and the campaign aimed at Warsaw in 1920 were both heavily analyzed. The Stavka intended to destroy all resistance before Berlin, take the city, and link up with the Western Allies on the Elbe River. Stalin remained skeptical that Britain and the United States would stick to their agreements and leave Berlin to the Soviets. This fear lit a fire under the General Staff and the front commanders to reach Berlin as soon as possible.³⁸⁵ Zhukov and Konev were recalled to Moscow for consultations with Stalin in preparation for the assault on Berlin. Stalin asked, "So, who is to capture Berlin, we or the Allies?"³⁸⁶ Konev assured Stalin that his front could take Berlin, to which the Soviet leader berated him, mockingly asking him how he could reorient his front to take Berlin when it was firmly committed in the south. Zhukov quickly replied that his front was in position and ready to push toward the city.³⁸⁷

³⁸³ Roberts, *Stalin's Wars*, 254.

³⁸⁴ Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 254-5.

³⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 258-9.

³⁸⁶ Oleg Rzhesheshevsky, *Konev (From Stalin's Generals)*, 99.

³⁸⁷ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 531.

Stalin played the two generals off of each other, believing their rivalry would produce results. The previous November Stalin had stated that Zhukov's 1st Byelorussian Front would operate in the Berlin sector, and he was careful in the April meeting not to negate that order. He left open, however, room for Konev to maneuver and possibly take the city himself. Antonev presented the general plan for the assault followed by the plans from the two front commanders. Wishing to be intentionally vague about lines of advance between the two fronts, Stalin suggested that Konev's front should swing and take Berlin from the south, should Zhukov encounter fierce resistance and be held up. Stalin said to the two generals, "Whoever breaks in first, let him take Berlin."³⁸⁸ Stalin maintained the rivalry as the two fronts pressed toward Berlin. When Zhukov phoned the Soviet leader to inform him of stiff German resistance before Berlin, Stalin replied that Konev would have to redirect his tank units to attack from the south.³⁸⁹ This was no doubt intended to light a fire under Zhukov and force the commander to prod his front into action.

Stalin ruthlessly exploited both the fear among the Red Army leadership that the Western Allies might take Berlin first and the personal rivalry between Zhukov and Konev. These factors ensured that a mass of Red Army units converged upon the German capital. The three fronts of Zhukov, Konev, and Rokossovsky suffered casualties much higher than expected, illustrating the Red Army leadership's relative indifference to the lives under their command. Nearly 80,000 Red Army soldiers were killed and nearly 275,000 were wounded in the assault on the city. Many of the

³⁸⁸ Antony Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945* (New York: Penguin Books, 2002), 146-7; Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 533.

³⁸⁹ Overy, *Russia's War*, 269.

casualties were the results of friendly fire, with Soviet soldiers attacking from different directions.³⁹⁰

For Stalin the taking of Berlin was the all important symbol of Soviet victory. He drove his generals relentlessly and allowed them to spend soldiers' lives generously in the quest to claim the German capital. By taking upon himself the mantle of Stavka coordinator, Stalin did not forget the lessons of the past four years. Though he certainly played a military role as Stavka coordinator, such as in the prodding of Malinovsky before Budapest, by and large his role was political. For propaganda purposes Stalin felt he needed to be seen leading the charge, though in fact he directed the campaign from the Kremlin. Even as he played Zhukov and Konev off against each other in their race to Berlin, there was no doubt as to who commanded their fronts. Stalin limited himself to general mission directives and let his subordinates command their armies.

Since the battle of Stalingrad, Stalin had leaned on the advice of his military technicians and Berlin was no different. Antonov proved a capable Chief of the General Staff; planning operational details that Stalin had neither the time nor the inclination to bother with. The assault on Berlin, with all of its time pressures, proved a better planned and executed operation than Stalin's ill-advised adventures in early 1942. Where those attacks had squandered Red Army resources in three directions in a vain attempt to expel the Germans from Soviet territory, the Berlin offensive showed the power, for all of its faults, of military concentration.

³⁹⁰ Beevor, *The Fall of Berlin 1945*, 424.

In military matters Stalin trusted the team assembled around him. Gone were the days when political generals like Voroshilov and Budenny dominated military affairs. Gone were the days when apparatchiks like Mekhlis shared responsibility with front commanders. Through trial and error the top level chain of command for the Red Army had been worked out and by 1945 it operated more efficiently and effectively than its enemy's. The reason for this was Stalin's eventual recognition that his military judgment was inferior to professional military officers. Though he maintained overall command throughout the war he gradually allowed his senior officers more and more latitude to exercise their authority without interference.

The Wehrmacht's last great offensive was directed not at the Soviet enemy, but against the Western Allies in the Ardennes forest. The final attack of the offensive, named 'Operation North Wind', was launched on the first day of 1945 and only penetrated about twelve miles into the American lines. The offensive was soon halted and the Allied line stabilized.³⁹¹

When the Ardennes offensive had opened two weeks earlier Hitler was already a broken man. One officer commented on his appearance, and in so doing perhaps offers a deeper glimpse of the German dictator's state of mind, "Hitler was a stooped figure with a pale and puffy face. He sat hunched in his chair. His hands trembled. His left arm twitched. When he walked he dragged one leg behind him. A sick man..."³⁹²

The decision to husband military resources and launch an attack in the West, despite the Soviet colossus barreling down on Germany from the East, can be attributed to the

³⁹¹ Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 745.

³⁹² William L. Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of Adolf Hitler* (New York: Scholastic Book Services, 1961), 161-2.

antagonism between OKW and OKH, as well as Hitler's failing military logic. A consummate yes-man, Jodl quickly agreed with Hitler when the later stated that Germany could still afford to lose land in the east, but not in the west.³⁹³ A tug-of-war began to play out between Jodl and Guderian over units and resources.³⁹⁴ Hitler ordered the powerful Sixth SS Panzer Army to Hungary after the failure of Ardennes offensive. Though Guderian was delighted that the powerful unit was transferred east, he objected to its placement so far to the south.³⁹⁵ The result of this competition between western and eastern commands was watered down efforts on both the Western and Eastern Fronts.

As Acting Chief of the General Staff, Guderian was given a mandate by Hitler to limit his concerns to the Russian front. This suited Guderian who tended to downplay the war in the west and constantly demanded that the east have priority for resources and troops. Where Zeitzler had been much more confrontational with OKW, Guderian had no interest in expanding the powers of the Chief of the General Staff at the expense of OKW, though he jealously guarded OKH prerogatives.³⁹⁶

In January of 1945 Hitler authorized the creation of Army Group Vistula to keep the Red Army out of German territory. Convinced that only proper leaders with National Socialist convictions could stem the Soviet tide, Hitler appointed Heinrich Himmler to command it. Guderian was horrified at the idea of this amateur general commanding such a vital formation. The Chief of the General Staff insisted that General Weichs, a capable army officer, be made Himmler's Chief of Staff. Hitler initially refused,

³⁹³ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 486.

³⁹⁴ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 208.

³⁹⁵ Hart, *Guderian*, 108-9.

³⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 103.

believing Weichs to be a disloyal officer, but eventually Guderian got his way. Hitler remarked, “The Chief of the General Staff has won a battle today.”³⁹⁷

Hitler’s statement is telling. It illustrates the very real feeling of war that existed between Hitler and the German Army generals. This war had been raging since the earliest days of the Nazi regime, but now with the attempted assassination of Hitler and the subsequent execution of General Beck it took on a deadly dimension. Guderian, along with most other officers, was no longer allowed to carry his sidearm to meetings with Hitler. His briefcase was always examined for fear of another bomb.³⁹⁸ In mid-January Hitler said to Guderian,

It is not you I am after, but the General Staff. It is intolerable to me that a group of intellectuals should presume to press their views on their superiors. But such is the General Staff system and that system I intend to smash.³⁹⁹

On January 21st Hitler again ordered that all “operational movements” be brought to his attention without delay. “In future I shall impose draconian punishment on any attempt at concealment, whether deliberate or arising from carelessness or oversight.”⁴⁰⁰

The war between the Führer and the Acting Chief of the General Staff intensified when Guderian went behind Hitler’s back to the foreign minister, von Ribbentrop. Guderian proposed that Ribbentrop attempt to seek peace without waiting for instructions

³⁹⁷ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 491.

³⁹⁸ Kershaw, *Hitler: 1936-1945, Nemesis*, 769.

³⁹⁹ Berthon, *Warlords*, 278.

⁴⁰⁰ *Ibid.*

from the Führer. When Hitler learned of this exchange from Ribbentrop he told Guderian that his actions were treasonous; another threat in the deadly game.⁴⁰¹

As Acting Chief of the General-Staff, Guderian was responsible for several operationally successful, though ultimately futile maneuvers. Perhaps the greatest was his spoiling attack against the Russian buildup in March which delayed their attack on Berlin by one month.⁴⁰²

Hitler's delusions continued as the military situation continued to fall apart. Unlike Stalin during the Soviet crisis of summer, 1941, Hitler was unwilling to seriously consider peace feelers. His strategy remained the hope that his enemies would have a falling out among themselves. In September, 1944, Hitler had said,

If necessary we'll fight on the Rhine. It doesn't make any difference where. We will continue this battle until, as Frederick the Great said, one of our... enemies gets too tired to fight any more. I live only for the purpose of leading this fight.⁴⁰³

The comparison with Prussia's position in the Seven Years' War became a point of faith with Hitler. Fate had intervened for Frederick, it would intervene with him.

In January Hitler allowed German troops in Courland to be cut off by Red Army assaults, despite Guderian's pleas to evacuate it by sea.⁴⁰⁴ In April the Ninth Army under General Busse was denied permission to retreat, and subsequently destroyed.⁴⁰⁵ The decision to place Himmler in command of Army Group Vistula proved a disaster and in

⁴⁰¹ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 492.

⁴⁰² Hart, *Guderian*, 111.

⁴⁰³ Shirer, *The Rise and Fall of Adolf Hitler*, 161.

⁴⁰⁴ Speer, *Inside the Third Reich*, 420-1.

⁴⁰⁵ Erickson, *The Road to Berlin*, 579.

mid-March Hitler berated the *Reichsführer-SS* for his failure to stem the Russian tide.⁴⁰⁶ Hitler desired to defend every corner of his faltering empire and disaster resulted. Even Nazi loyalists like Himmler became scapegoats. To the last Hitler maintained his unswerving belief in his own superior military judgment, seeing in his generals weak and cowering figures, tainted by the treason of their brother officers.

The afternoon of April 22 saw Hitler raging against those whom he felt had betrayed him. Waffen-SS General Felix Steiner had not attacked Red Army units as ordered and the Soviet ring was tightening around Berlin. His generals were all traitors, responsible for defeat after defeat. Hitler finally saw reality and declared the war was lost, Germany was doomed. He also announced his intention, over the protests of his generals, to remain in Berlin to the very end.⁴⁰⁷ With his enemies closing in Hitler appointed General of Infantry Hans Krebs to the post of Chief of the General Staff. Hitler stated that this was because of Krebs' total devotion to the Führer and went on to dismiss Halder, Zeitzler, and Guderian as idiots.⁴⁰⁸ This appointment, however, was an empty gesture as Colonel-General Jodl was running virtually everything by this point from his OKW Operations Staff. At this time Jodl finally realized his decade long dream of OKW surpassing the army once and fall as the premier military command authority under Hitler. On April 25 he wrote in his diary that "the Führer signs the order for the command organization and the centralization of the staffs."⁴⁰⁹

⁴⁰⁶ Peter Padfield, *Himmler*, (New York: MJF Books, 1990), 569.

⁴⁰⁷ Trevor-Roper, *The Last Days of Hitler*, 118-9.

⁴⁰⁸ Görlitz, *History of the German General Staff*, 492.

⁴⁰⁹ Macksey, *Why the Germans Lose at War*, 217-9.

Hitler's micromanagement of the operational level of warfare and his unwillingness to properly delegate military authority had sewn bitter fruit for Germany by 1945. The ongoing antagonism, fostered by Hitler and his divide-and-rule command style, between OKW and OKH only led to confusion and dissipation of resources. Hitler cared little for combined strategy. The General Staff, whose abilities and efficiency had been steadily on the decline since the beginning of the war, paled in comparison to its much more dynamic Soviet counterpart.

In the last months of the war the Red Army General Staff served as an indispensable operational planning agency which Stalin relied on heavily. The German General Staff had become an impediment to Hitler's fantastic military delusions. Stalin's front commanders like Zhukov, Rokossovsky and Konev had served in high positions throughout the war and were trusted voices in all phases of operational planning and execution. Hitler had long ago fired his most able Army Group commanders like Manstein and Kleist and had placed his faith in military incompetents like Himmler. For the battle of Berlin Stalin had nominally assumed operational command but had allowed his officers full authority over their units. Hitler continued to meddle in even the smallest operational matters.

CHAPTER 7

CONCLUSION

On April 30th, 1945 Adolf Hitler killed himself as the Soviets advanced on his headquarters in Berlin, the German Army a shattered shell of its former self. Two months later Josef Stalin accepted the rank of Generalissimo, the Red Army a gigantic colossus standing astride all of Eastern Europe.

Both dictators were military amateurs who commanded the greatest military machines in modern history. Hitler's Wehrmacht put into practice prevailing military theories that followed the stalemate of World War I. The result was a new war of maneuver where tanks and planes played the spearhead to conventional infantry-oriented armies. The success of the German Army in the early years of World War II owes much to the German mastery of such theories and Hitler's backing of military innovators.

Hitler's relationship with his military leadership evolved over the course of his dictatorship. The traditionally conservative officer corps welcomed the advent of the Nazi leader for their shared desire to rearm, to cast off the humiliation of the Treaty of Versailles, and to make Germany a world power once again. The German Army needed a political focal point for their military program. Wishing to avoid the odium of a military dictatorship, the German Army found in National Socialism a party capable of mobilizing the masses in German society for seemingly conservative ends. Officers and

other German conservatives felt that Hitler's radicalism could be contained or mitigated with the day to day necessities of wielding political power. Hitler knew that the backing or at least the neutrality of the German Army was necessary for any government. As Hitler's political aims required acquiesces of the officer corps, a political alliance was forged and proved the basis for German military power in the Second World War.

Historian Trevor N. Dupuy states that "Prusso-German military successes were based upon a transitory technical mastery of war."⁴¹⁰ The key word *is transitory*. The Germans lost this edge largely because Germany's military technicians were increasingly hampered in their operational art by an absolute ruler who believed he understood the situation better than they. Hitler had his moments of military brilliance, such as his input into and backing of Manstein's plan for the Ardennes assault in 1940. Hitler's hold order for the German Army after the failure to take Moscow in 1941 almost certainly saved the situation in Russia. However, as the war ground on without decision these moments of brilliance became increasingly rare before finally disappearing all together.

Hitler's micromanagement of the German Army is evident from his repeated assumption of military positions lower on the chain of command. As Führer Hitler exercised command over Germany's armed forces as Commander-in-Chief. In 1938 he took upon himself the position of Defense Minister after the fall of Blomberg. During the drive on Moscow Hitler sacked Brauchitsch and made himself Commander-in-Chief of the Army. Hitler's hubris reached its peak when he temporarily appointed himself commander of Army Group A in 1942.

⁴¹⁰ Dupuy, *A Genius for War*, 292.

Throughout Hitler's management of the war he continually flaunted the army chain of command. He came to rely on OKW as a personal command staff, bypassing OKH in issuing orders to field commanders. The original concept for OKW as imagined by Jodl and Blomberg, that of an interservice command staff, never fully materialized thanks to Hitler's divisive practices of command. For the most part the Russian front was given priority for units and resources, but the fight against the Western Allies continued to demand its share. The sudden breaking off of the offensive at Kursk and transport of crack units to Italy foreshadowed more ominous developments for the German Army in the Soviet Union. OKW increasingly battled the General Staff in the quest for Hitler's favor. By late 1944 the division between it and OKH became a serious liability. Germany lacked any coordinated military strategy and both sides were reduced to begging for Hitler's support. Additionally, OKW's championing of Hitler's decision to launch the Ardennes offensive ensured that the more critical Russian Front was robbed of essential resources.

Had Hitler not applied his divide and rule leadership methods to the military, he would have been wise to reorganize the armed forces system along entirely different lines. The Great General Staff of the Army should have been dramatically downsized, (with the officer corps going along with Hitler's other political and military outrages they would have accepted this). Instead the creation of OKW should have included a combined Greater General Staff that made use of staff officers from all branches. This Greater General Staff for OKW should have been the supreme military strategy and command authority, independently led, under Hitler. The Great General Staff of the Army should have been reduced in authority and scope to deal with the technical and

organizational issues for which officers like Beck, Halder, Zeitzler, and Guderian would have been better suited.

Hitler's micromanagement of military operations from hundreds of miles away, such as his insistence on directing the defense of the Stalingrad pocket, inevitably caused disaster and flew in the face of Prusso-German military tradition. Just as important in explaining the failure of the German Army, however, is Hitler's refusal to take responsibility for his own bad decisions. After Stalingrad his officers continued to call for a Commander-in-Chief for the Russian front, and Hitler continued to refuse. For Adolf Hitler the General Staff, the German Army and Wehrmacht leaderships, and officers in the field from army group to divisional commanders were institutions and positions for carrying out the orders of the Führer. Their judgment and advice was of little importance.

It is ironic that the man so remembered for his paranoia and suspicion of those around him came to trust absolutely, in military matters at least, his military technicians. In the late 1930s Stalin had no qualms about murdering thousands of Red Army officers when he suspected that the officer corps was rife with potential rebellion. Lacking the long tradition of the German Army, the Red Army was entirely a creation of the Russian Revolution. Unlike Hitler, Stalin had to make no compromises with his military. As absolute master of the Communist Party, Stalin's ultimate leadership over the Red Army was a point of fact.

From the mid thirties until the end of the war Stalin's relationship with his military was a balancing act. Constantly fearing the Red Army's potential power as a nucleus of counter-revolution, Stalin's inclination was to place the military under intense

political oversight. Political commissars shared military responsibilities with Red Army commanders. Traditional ideas of rank of privilege were discouraged. Political cronies like Voroshilov and Budenny held the highest military positions. Party apparatchiks like Mekhlis flooded the Red Army with communist propaganda.

When military efficiency became a real priority for the Soviet leadership, however, political controls were relaxed. In the aftermath of the Finnish debacle and the witnessing of German success in the summer of 1940, unitary command was restored to Red Army officers. Officers like Shaposhnikov conducted courses critical of Red Army failures. The capable Timoshenko replaced Voroshilov as Commissar for Defense. Military necessity very obviously began to outweigh political considerations in Stalin's mind.

The political controls returned following the German invasion in 1941. Dual command was reintroduced, giving political commissars tremendous powers at the very moment when Red Army officers needed their military authority more than ever. Stavka representatives acted as super-commissars among the front commanders, ensuring loyalty and compliance with Stalin's wishes. The Stavka representatives ranged from militarily able officers like Shaposhnikov, Timoshenko, and Zhukov, to Stalin's political cronies Voroshilov and Mekhlis.

The tide returned during the Stalingrad crisis when unitary command was again established, the military rank of general reappeared, and gold braid became an important symbol of command for the first time since the downfall of the Tsar. Stavka representatives became Stavka coordinators, working with various front commanders in order to ensure victory. This time Stalin had struck upon the right formula to create the

best conditions for achieving victory within the Red Army. This formula held until the end of the war but not long after. With victory over the fascists achieved Stalin proved quick to humble his military leaders once again.⁴¹¹

Where Hitler increasingly took upon himself positions lower and lower in the German chain of command, Stalin centralized his hold on military power quickly after the German invasion. Six weeks before 'Operation Barbarossa' began Stalin formally became head of government, giving him his first legal position to command the Red Army. In the weeks following the German attack the Soviets created agencies to administer the Soviet Union in wartime. The State Defense Committee (GKO) served as the Soviet Union's wartime government while the Stavka served as the military high command. Stalin served as the chairman of the GKO and, after brief leadership under Timoshenko, was named the Supreme Commander of the Stavka. Stalin also took upon himself the traditional role of Defense Commissar.

After the shock of the German invasion Stalin slowly came to rely on his military technicians. The first great turning point was the halt of the German advance before Moscow in late 1941. Stalin had called upon Zhukov, the victor of Khalkhin Gol and the former Chief of the General Staff who had argued for abandoning Kiev, to defend the Soviet capital. The victory impressed upon Stalin the value of military professionals, though he was not yet convinced that their military judgment was superior to his own.

The Red Army had always been offensively oriented and this reflected Stalin's preference. Without help from the Stavka's principal operational planning agency, the

⁴¹¹ Service, *Stalin*, 528.

Red Army General Staff, Stalin planned the disastrous offensives of early 1942. As the German Army advanced on Stalingrad later in the year, Stalin again called upon his military technicians and again his faith in them was rewarded. As the war continued military figures gained importance in Stalin's eyes and political cronies were allowed to meddle less and less in military affairs. Zhukov, Konev, Rokossovsky, Vasilevsky, and Antonov took center stage in the military struggle as Voroshilov, Budenny, Mekhlis, Malenkov and others increasingly served the war effort in supporting roles.

Though Stalin believed he could never publicly take responsibility for Red Army failures like those following the German invasion in 1941 or the disastrous early 1942 offensives, he nevertheless gradually changed his outlook. The military technician replaced the political apparatchik in the operational running of the war. Though Stalin served as a Stavka coordinator during the drive on Berlin, his faith in his commanders and military planners remained strong. Stalin's fear of being associated with failure would never have allowed him to take upon the role of a Stavka coordinator if he was not absolutely convinced that the Red Army would accomplish its objectives.⁴¹²

The relationships of Hitler and Stalin with their military leaderships were processes. As absolute rulers of their nations both dictators dominated their militaries. In both the German Army and the Red Army they were the supreme authority. The dictators exercised their authority in different ways over time. Though Hitler had little love for the German officer class, he was content with their political alliance through the first few years of his reign, even sacrificing radical elements of his own party to appease

⁴¹² Glantz, *When Titans Clashed*, 288.

it. As war approached Hitler felt the need to take on more and more military authority. Though his authority continued to increase throughout the war Hitler patently refused to accept the contingent responsibility. The result was the destruction of the German Army and the downfall of the Third Reich.

Like Hitler, Stalin held the Red Army officer class in contempt, and for many of the same reasons. Both dictators viewed their militaries as potential hotbeds of conservative reaction. With the Soviet bureaucracy firmly in place, Stalin did not require the goodwill of the Red Army the way Hitler needed the approval of the German officer class. Beginning in 1937 Stalin dealt with his suspected officers through arrest, torture, and murder. There would be nothing comparable to it in Nazi Germany until the exposure of the July 20th bomb plotters. Once the war with Germany began, however, Stalin slowly came to rely on his military professionals. In Stalin's eyes they virtually ceased to be a threat to Soviet power and indeed gradually became its saviors.

Over time Stalin learned to work effectively with his military technicians. After the invasion of the Soviet Union, Hitler's ability to work with German military technicians began to wane. The effective German relationship between dictator and military leadership, like the German technical mastery of warfare, was transitory. The effective Soviet relationship between dictator and military leadership was slow in coming, but proved a key factor in the Soviet victory in the Second World War.

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